Meaning in Lives Nearing Their End

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Abstract
In this paper, I consider the idea of meaning in life as I believe it has arisen in some discussions of ageing and death. I critically examine and compare the views of Atul Gawande and Ezekiel Emanuel, connecting their views to the idea of meaning in life. I further consider the relation of meaning in life to both the dignity of the person and the reasonableness of continuing or not continuing to live. In considering these issues, I evaluate and draw on Bernard Williams' distinction between categorical and conditional desires, Susan Wolf's work on meaning in life, and Jeremy Waldron's views on dignity in old age.

In this paper, I consider the idea of meaning in life as I believe it has arisen in some discussions of ageing and death. I consider the views of Atul Gawande and Ezekiel Emanuel, connecting them to ideas of meaning in life, reasons to continue or not continue living, and the dignity of the person. In considering these issues, I evaluate and draw on the work of philosophers Bernard Williams, Susan Wolf, and Jeremy Waldron among others.

1. Atul Gawande's Being Mortal

In Gawande's (2017) book *Being Mortal*[1] he emphasizes the importance of continuing to have aims that give life meaning as it is approaching its end. These aims may be characterized by 'narrowed focus' given that projects that require long-term survival are not feasible and there may be an overall focus on relationships rather than on projects. One particular role that Gawande thinks can give meaning to life as it ends is the 'dying role' in which one passes on truths about life or brings to closure relationships.

Aiming to retain meaning in life to the end of life goes beyond merely avoiding pain and suffering, the original aim of hospice and palliative care. However, Gawande supports hospice because he thinks that the dual aims of not suffering and retaining meaning

[1] For my earliest discussion of his book see Kamm (2017). It is the basis for Chapter 3 in *Almost Over*.

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often imply that one should not pursue medical treatments that have only a small chance of success. This is not only because they may cause suffering but because pursuing them can interfere with remaining activities that give meaning to life and in particular with the dying role.

I find it useful to connect these views of Gawande's with the distinction that Bernard Williams drew between conditional desires and categorical desires.[2] (One might also speak of conditional and categorical goods that can be the objects of desires and of conditional and categorical reasons these goods can give one.) Avoiding pain and suffering are objects of conditional desires in that they are things one could reasonably want if one will continue to live.[3] However, they are not typically the objects of categorical desires as Williams understands these, since objects of categorical desires give one a reason to go on living in order to get them (even when a primal desire to remain alive, which Williams recognizes, is absent[4]). Desires for simple activities that one looks forward to can be categorical desires; they needn't be for what he calls 'ground projects.'[5] Avoiding pain and suffering is not typically something one wants to stay alive to get.[6]

[2] See Williams' (1973) and also his (1981). I make use of Williams' distinction in discussing various views in *Almost Over*.

[3] The things it would be reasonable to want if one goes on living need not be conditional in the sense that one will go on living only if (on condition that) they are present. This sense would make them like side constraints on going on and their absence decisive reasons for not going on living.

[4] He says 'I do not want to deny…a sheer reactive drive to self-preservation'. (However, he thinks 'this cannot be the minimal categorical desire' since when the question whether to go on gets asked, the reactive drive is already shown not to be enough by itself to sustain life (Williams, 1973, p. 86). I raise some objections to this view in *Almost Over,* Chapter 6.)

[5] He says 'propelling concerns may be of a relatively everyday kind such as certainly provide the ground of many sorts of happiness' (1981, p. 12). One of the benefits of speaking of categorical objects of desires or categorical reasons to desire certain things is that even if someone doesn't actually desire anything, there can be objects worthy of being desired and reasons to have these things. This makes it possible for someone's life to be worth continuing even if he desires nothing since things will actually occur in his life without his desiring them (they just occur) that are good in a way that makes it reasonable to continue on to get them (e.g., friendship that arises despite someone not ever thinking to desire it). To simplify matters, I will mostly speak of categorical and conditional desires but these other possible uses of the categorical/conditional distinction should be assumed to exist as well.

[6] At least this is so if one assumes that death involves nonexistence for if one is trying to avoid the pains of Hell, one might want to stay alive in order

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Gawande's idea that pursuits and relationships that provide meaning in life should continue to life's end implies, I think, that even those who are near the end can have categorical desires which provide a reason to go on living even in the short term. Hence one might not resist death by pursuing unlikely-to-succeed medical treatments that interfere with satisfying the categorical desires. Yet one would not seek death (for example, by suicide or by refusing easy life-saving measures[7]) since one would not want to escape the life one was living. Instead, one would simply accept that death was coming shortly.

In the part of his book concerning those not terminally ill but aged, Gawande also emphasizes the importance of pursuits that continue to provide meaning in life. He claims that having these is more important than the safety and security that professionals who care for the aged typically emphasize. He says that without what gives meaning in life people are likely to lack the will to live and will omit to do even easy things that are needed to stay alive (e.g., take a flu shot).

Given his emphasis on retaining meaning in life, I hypothesize that (though he does not specifically say so) Gawande might believe that if one lacked meaning in life, it would not be prudentially senseless – putting aside moral objections – to seek or to not resist the end of one's life even though one was not physically suffering.[8] This would mean that absence of meaning was a sufficient if not a decisive reason to seek or to not resist the end of one's life. (By 'sufficient reason' I mean that it can justify an act by showing it to be reasonable; not merely that it can explain the act's occurrence causally as a matter

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to avoid pain and suffering in one's afterlife. A scientist's project could be proving that a certain drug will prevent his pain and suffering. So he could go on to live because his life would lack pain and suffering. But this is only a means to living on to prove the drug works.

[7] To the extent that hospice care is inconsistent with such easy measures (e.g., flu shots or antibiotics), it too may pose a problem for satisfying short-term categorical desires.

[8] Some may think seeking death by suicide would be senseless because it is morally wrong. I argue against this view in various places, including Chapter 7 of *Almost Over*. Furthermore, in this discussion I am only concerned with the significance of the presence or absence of meaning in life for the person whose life or death is at stake rather than for others whom his life or death might affect. Notice that omitting easy resistance to death may occur even without seeking death. This is because one might merely seek not to be complicit in keeping oneself alive. I discuss this issue in Chapter 6 of *Almost Over*.

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of motivation.) Similarly, that one will have fun could be a sufficient reason for going to an amusement park but it needn't be decisive; one could have sufficient reason to do something else because it will instead be relaxing. Further, one person could be more attracted to the possibility of relaxation whereas someone else could be more attracted to the possibility of having fun without impugning the reasonableness of the other person's choice. (Even more strongly, as Thomas Scanlon says,[9] 'reasons can render an action rationally eligible without making it rationally required in the absence of some countervailing reasons…Reasons themselves are not optional: a consideration is a reason in a certain situation or it is not. What is optional is acting on certain reasons.' So one could have a sufficient reason that is not decisive even in the absence of a sufficient reason to do something else. As an example, Scanlon says that for the pleasure it would give me 'it makes sense for me to listen to some music, but even if I know this I do not have to have some countervailing reason for not turning on the radio in order not to be open to rational criticism for failing to do so'.)

Might it also be true that the absence of meaning in one's life is a decisive reason for not staying alive and for seeking or not resisting the end of one's life? Then the presence of meaning in life could be understood to be a necessary condition for the reasonableness of staying alive.

I think the interpretation of Gawande's view that makes having meaning in life a necessary condition for the reasonableness of staying alive is implausible. For he discusses a case in which a man says that he would go through quite a lot to keep living even if his life only involved watching football and eating chocolate ice cream. It is hard to believe that these things provide meaning in life rather than merely being types of pleasure that arise from actively enjoying certain things (as opposed to being pleasure caused by neural stimulation). Yet the man seemed to have enjoyment (e.g., of football and chocolate ice cream) as an object of categorical desire and Gawande thought the man's view could make sense, as do I. I conclude that while lack of meaning in life might be a sufficient reason for not going on in life (and Gawande may think this) it isn't a decisive reason for not going on (so that going on couldn't make sense); for example, there can be other sufficient reasons to stay alive and other grounds for categorical desires.

So far in discussing Gawande I have used the terms 'meaning in life' and 'giving meaning to life' but not said what Gawande thinks

[9] In his (2014, pp. 106–107).

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the terms mean. In the section of the book discussing those who are dying, Gawande takes having meaning in life to involve having a particular type of pleasure felt at narrative high points in life, a little bit of which can outweigh many bads and whose absence can outweigh many goods. This strikes me as a Millian view, reducing all goods to pleasure but distinguishing pleasures by quality and not only quantity. Gawande supports his view with the example of a ball game. He says of watching the team that has performed beautifully and then loses: 'We feel that the ending ruins the whole experience. Yet there's a contradiction at the root of that judgment. The experiencing-self had whole hours of pleasure and just a moment of displeasure, but the remembering self sees no pleasure at all' (Gawande, 2017, p. 239).

I do not think this experientialist conception of meaning in life is correct. In the case of the ball game there is no contradiction. In focusing on the loss, the so-called remembering self need not forget all the prior experiential pleasure nor judge the moment of displeasure at the loss as qualitatively more important. Rather it does not forget that the point of the game is to win and this point gives meaning to most of what is done in the game. That point is more important than the pleasure (or displeasure) the game produced either during its course or even in its successful (or unsuccessful) end. I think that the merit of Gawande's example of the ball game is that it shows that the meaning represented by an achievement or relationship in life is not a matter of the amount of pleasure had in or in response to it. One can suffer greatly to achieve something meaningful without thinking that the amount or quality of pleasure had in, or in response to, the achievement outweighs the suffering that makes possible what is meaningful. This is because it is not in terms of pleasure that one evaluates meaningful events or things at all. (Elsewhere in his book Gawande offers a different account of meaning in life which I will consider below.)

I have other concerns about Gawande's views of meaning at the end of life. First, he attributes great significance to endings suggesting that having meaning in them is worth giving up on even many earlier goods. This is one reason he frowns on taking risks to extend one's life by medical means that will probably fail and leave one with a bad end of life. This is also why he uses the analogy of the ball game whose importance is in how it ends not in hours of pleasure or displeasure preceding the end. He also makes use of psychologist Daniel Kahneman's Peak-End Rule, according to which people remember episodes by their peak of good or bad and how the episode ends rather than by the total amount of time spent

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in good or bad states (Redelmeier and Kahneman, 1996). One of Kahneman's examples is colonoscopy: people remember the worst part and how it ends. So they are more likely to repeat the procedure on the basis of more favorable recollections of colonoscopies that involve overall more pain but whose final moments are not as painful as they would be if the procedure ended earlier. Whereas Kahneman's Peak-End Rule is an empirical report of retrospective evaluation and its effects on future choices, Gawande suggests that the Peak-End Rule could also apply to the 'anticipatory' (prospective) evaluation of events and experiences, and that deciding whether to apply it is a normative ('should') question. When the rule is used normatively, he thinks that it shows that in living and making choices, one should not merely be concerned with the average of good and bad in one's life but with the narrative structure of one's life that involves goals achieved and the character of endings. A prospective use of the rule seems to recommend doing what will still allow for meaningful (high) points and a good end. One way of achieving this would be to have one's life end on a high point. The fact that this is not Gawande's recommendation suggests that he is not opposed to living through (and ending on) some declines from a good peak. However, the rule might still recommend bringing about some very good peak, even if it can only be followed by a lengthy bad experiential period that is worse than nothing, so long as one will then rise to a minimally less bad ending. This does not seem like good advice (if the ending is not necessary to secure the goodness of the very good peak). And if someone were asked antecedent to a colonoscopy whether he would want to have it extended so that he will have overall more pain in order that it end with lesser pain, he should (and probably would) reject this if his concern were only about this colonoscopy. All this suggests that the Peak-End Rule is not useful as a normative guide to prospective choices.[10]

Furthermore, I doubt that a dying patient should significantly reduce the amount of time she still can live during which she has nonpeak adequate experiences just in order to make the very end point of her life better. For example, suppose a surgery were sure to make only her last few hours worse than they would otherwise be but would eliminate her nausea for weeks so she could get some

[10] Daniel Kahneman did once suggest that since we spend more time remembering our experiences than having them, perhaps we should prospectively choose which ones to have on the basis of how we will remember them (in his 1994) For a criticism of this view see my (2007).

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(mere) enjoyment in life before that worse end. She might reasonably choose surgery. One point here is that as Kahneman presents the Peak-End Rule it applies to the very end point of what is identified as an episode, and as such this Nausea Case shows that the end part of the rule does not work well as a prospective guide. However, Gawande most often thinks of 'the end' as the entire dying period of someone's life that could go on for months. This leaves it open that one might average goods and bads within that last period (or give priority to reducing the badness of any forthcoming worst point in life, whether it would come before or at the very end point of life). Furthermore, Gawande speaks of meaningful peaks that can occur within the extended ending period of one's life. Hence, the contrast between peak and end on which the Peak-End Rule depends is not maintained in his use of it if 'the end' refers to an extended dying period.

While it makes little sense for someone who will shortly die to focus on whether her memories of her dying period and very end point will be in accord with a retrospective use of Peak-End Rule, Gawande also mentions (e.g., 2017, p. 242) the effect on relatives of memories of a good end for their loved one. From the patient's intrapersonal point of view, this raises the issue of how it affects the meaning in her remaining life to know that she will affect the memories of her relatives in accord with the Peak-End Rule. It would certainly not be a sign of love on the part of those relatives to deny the dying person relief from nausea for weeks merely so that they have memories of a good peak (e.g., she can go to a wedding) and do not have memories of a very end point that is bad, caused by the procedure that would relieve earlier weeks of nausea.

Gawande's comparison of the end of a life with the end of a ball game seems particularly inapt. First, the end of the game really is the very end point by contrast to the longer dying phase. Second, since the point of the ball game is to win, there is a definite final goal toward which the players aim that (to a great degree) gives meaning to all the efforts made in the game. The same is not true with life; all the time before the end of a life (whether this is thought of as the very end point or the more extended dying period) is not lived for the sake of having the best possible end in terms of continuation of meaningful (or even enjoyable) activities. It would be particularly pernicious, I think, to use the ball game analogy to try to dissuade someone from using medical treatments that are the only way to get a small chance of truly lengthy survival on the ground that they will probably result in his life ending with a lot of physical suffering. This is especially so if there are means

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such as assisted suicide to escape the suffering. Gawande offers a life to the end with meaning in it as the alternative to physician-assisted suicide but it may sometimes be preferable to lose meaning near the end for a chance at much more life with the option of physician assisted suicide to avoid bad effects of not succeeding.

Finally, it is possible that many of the medical treatments that Gawande thinks interfere with having meaning in life at its end may provide opportunities for meaning in life. For example, suppose that someone chooses to pursue medical treatments because they have a small chance of extending his life, and these treatments introduce much pain and suffering in what is probably the last short part of his life. He certainly has a purpose of getting more life but this may not help him retain meaning while suffering. However, new discoveries that will gradually increase the efficacy of these treatments may depend on people like him trying them. Then helping to improve treatments may be an effect of what he does for other reasons and its having this effect may be enough, independent of his aiming to produce it, to make personally meaningful what he does in his remaining life. This is so even if he would not suffer treatment only for that effect and would suffer without it for his own sake (though suffering might then not be meaningful). Indeed, we might broaden the idea of an (optional) 'dying role' to include such ways of attaining meaning.

Nonetheless, suppose someone is offered some project that could give meaning to his suffering while dying and yet he prefers to use terminal sedation to avoid suffering though this gives no meaning to his remaining life. His choice to avoid the suffering rather than give meaning to his life seems entirely reasonable as well. In this case, having meaning in life would not be a decisive reason for going on in life in a certain way.

2. Ezekiel Emanuel's 'Why I Hope to Die at 75'

Ezekiel Emanuel's (2014) article 'Why I Hope to Die at 75'[11] is another discussion by a bioethicist that seems to me to be related to the issue of meaning in life though Emanuel does not specifically put the matter this way.[12] He discusses what to do after a 'complete

[11] He says he is not recommending suicide or physician assisted suicide and I will not here examine the moral status of these acts. I discuss his views of them in *Almost Over*.

[12] The discussion that follows is based on Chapter 6 of *Almost Over*.

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life' by which he means the part of one's life that has the major achievements, great or small, that one will have in one's life. He thinks that the loss of capacities associated with life after (roughly) 75 make it at least not unreasonable, from a self-interested perspective, to refuse even easy and sure to succeed means that will keep one alive (e.g., a flu shot or antibiotic treatment).[13] This is so even if the life after 75 is not plagued by pain and suffering or disastrous mental and physical ailments, and one even finds happiness in pursuits open to those with ordinary diminished capacities brought on by old age. The exception to all this, he says, are those statistical 'outliers' who continue to be creative achievers.

Emanuel says that the life of even non-outliers beyond 75 is not worse than death. This could mean that value-wise it is either equivalent/on a par with death or else better than death. If it is the former, then resisting death or bringing it about might not make sense since neither would produce a change in value. But suppose the life is somewhat better than death. How can it make self-interested sense not to make minimal efforts to resist, or even bring about, the end of a life not worse than death? For example, Shelly Kagan in his book *Death* (2012) represents death as at the zero point on a graph, a life worse than death as below the x-axis and a life better than death as above the x-axis. He argues that from a self-interested perspective it 'makes no sense' to seek or accede to death if one's life could still be above the x-axis.[14] Suppose that one faces the prospect of losing all capacities for action and thought except for being given pleasurable sensations by way of neural stimulation. Assuming pleasure is an objective good above the x-axis, Kagan's view implies that it would make no sense to prefer death to this condition. By contrast, I think Emanuel would deny this.

Emanuel's reasons for his view primarily center on (a) the lack of worth of the activities one can expect to engage in past 75 and (b) one's lack of interest in engaging in such activities even if (c) one could predict that they would give one happiness. Focusing on the worth of activities and interest in them as well as the possibility of unworthy sources of happiness recalls the components of Susan

[13] He starts with an even stronger claim that everyone (with a few exceptions) would be better off not living beyond 75. I will here only discuss the weaker claim that it is not unreasonable for some average post-75 people not to go on after 75.

[14] However, I have argued that this judgment of his conflicts with other things he says in his book. See Kamm (2017) and *Almost Over*, Chapter 2.

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Wolf's account of meaning in life.[15] If so, we might construe Emanuel as thinking that it would not be unreasonable to refuse to continue living because further life will lack what can provide meaning in life.[16] Whereas Gawande is concerned with people retaining meaning in their life to its end even when the end is probably soon, Emanuel could be understood as concerned with not living beyond the point where meaning is possible even when the end needn't be soon.

Wolf's primary theory is that meaning in life is provided only by positive engagement with what one correctly believes are objectively valuable pursuits. She says that this means that there must be a union of subjective and objective value that she calls 'fitting fulfilment'. Fulfillment is a subjective condition broader than happiness since, Wolf thinks, being fulfilled can be present when there is concern and even anxiety as when a parent is fulfilled in devotion to a handicapped child. Importantly, feeling fulfilled in positively engaging with something is not enough on her view to produce meaning in life if the object of one's positive engagement is actually not worth engaging with. One example she gives is Fulfilled Sisyphus who finds fulfillment in endlessly rolling his rock up a hill only to have it fall down again. Even if he thinks there is meaning in his life, Wolf thinks he is wrong because what he is doing is objectively worthless. By 'objective' value or worth Wolf means no more than that believing that something has value is not enough to ensure that it has value; its value or disvalue is independent of belief and one could be wrong in one's beliefs. On the other hand, Wolf thinks that if one is doing something objectively worthwhile without being positively engaged with it (e.g., one is forced to do something worthwhile that one hates), there will also not be meaning in one's life, because the subjective component will be missing.

It seems to me that Wolf's concern about meaning in life should be distinguished from the question of the whether one's life overall has a meaning. Meaning in life can be present in particular activities and relationships without there being some meaning in one's life overall. One can have lived a meaningful life even if its particular meaningful elements don't hang together in a way that lets us deduce an overall meaning or narrative. (However, Wolf does specifically connect her view of meaning *in* life with what she calls 'the age-old question of the meaning *of* life' since the idea that we are 'actively

[15] See her (2010).

[16] At one point, Emanuel says that doing puzzles and reading all the time is not even a life.

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engaged with projects of independent worth' beyond their value *for us* may put to rest worries about our insignificance that she suggests that age-old question is about) (Wolf, 2010, p. 29). On the other hand, 'meaning in life' suggests that at some point in her life the person will recognize the worth of what she is doing or has done. But it seems we can draw a distinction between 'meaning in life' and what I shall call 'meaningfulness in a life' where the latter could exist if someone has an objectively worthwhile component in her life but does not see it as such and hence does not feel fulfilled in it. (Wolf considers the distinction in response to Robert Adams' commentary on her work) (Wolf, 2010, pp 75–84).Wolf says that people want their lives to be connected to what is objectively worthwhile and her theory provides that. But that could also be provided by a theory that emphasizes what I'm calling 'meaningfulness in a life'. For example, imagine a case where ex ante one has to choose between (a) a life of greater meaningfulness (e.g., producing masterpieces but nevertheless feeling disappointed in them because one does not recognize their worth) and (b) a life with meaning in it (e.g., feeling fulfilled in producing artwork that is worthwhile but not at masterpiece level). At least someone who was truly passionate about art and willing to sacrifice his good mental state for it might choose life (a) rather than (b). This suggests that meaningfulness in life, not meaning in life as Wolf understands it, could sometimes be most important to us.

How does all this match with Emanuel's views? If he were right that the activities open to most post-75 (e.g., he cites doing puzzles and reading all the time) are objectively not worth doing for a sufficiently long remaining time alive, then there would be nothing with which those post-75 could positively engage that had sufficient objective value. If they were happy or fulfilled doing insufficiently worthwhile activities for a sufficiently long remaining life, they would be making the same mistake that Fulfilled Sisyphus makes. Those who are not attracted to this type of remaining life would be correct and more worthy of respect. Wolf implies something similar about Sisyphus when she says of Fulfilled Sisyphus, 'one might wonder whether the transformation that Sisyphus undergoes from being unhappy, bored, and frustrated to being blissfully fulfilled…actually makes his situation worse'. In not recognizing and responding correctly to the worthlessness of what he is doing 'he is either afflicted by mental illness or delusions or diminished in his intellectual powers' (Wolf, 2010, pp. 23–24).

Emanuel need not deny that puzzles and reading are (what Wolf calls) harmless pleasures when they are intermittent respites but it

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is problematic for him when they are one's entire life at least after a 'complete life'. The following two diagrams describe the first and second possibilities respectively where '____' represents worthwhile activities and '…' harmless pleasures.

1. ____…____…____…____
2. _____…….

Possibly, by contrast to Wolf, Emanuel's focus is more on what I called meaningfulness in life since his subjective lack of enthusiasm about pursuits open to diminished capacities is based on his view that they lack worth. He does not identify the lack of enthusiasm for something worthwhile as negative in itself (as it is for Wolf). Nevertheless, even he might argue against being forced to continue on in pursuits whose significant worth one does not recognize or to which one does not feel attracted.

I have focused on Emanuel's view of the worth of the activities available after a complete life rather than the radical change in activities pre- and post-75. Some think that a radical change in the nature of one's activities would create an 'identity crisis', in that in a certain sense one cannot continue being the person one has for the most part been, though of course one is not literally a different person. But suppose that post-75, Emanuel had to stop being a professional bioethicist and discovered that he had a previously unrecognized genius for pursuits even more worth engaging in (e.g., groundbreaking work in physics or painting masterpieces). I do not think he would reject a radical change in his 'identity' when it involved moving on to very different activities of greater (or even equal) worth.[17]

Emanuel's unwillingness to do what will help him continue on after a complete life if it lacks activities of sufficient worth can also be related to Williams' distinction between categorical and conditional desires if this distinction goes beyond mere desires and allows for objectively justified desires (e.g., reasonable ones). Conditional desires would be ones it is reasonable to have *if* one is going to go on living. These might include no pain and suffering. Categorical desires would be for things that one could reasonably want to go on living to get (e.g., seeing great art). It would usually not be reasonable to have a categorical desire to go on living merely in order not to be in pain or to avoid suffering even if one would reasonably want these things if one was going to remain alive. Hence,

[17] These would not be like cases of ordinary 'outliers' who continue the sort of work they have already done and whose continued creativity therefore raises no comparable 'identity crisis'.

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Emanuel might be understood to be claiming that there is nothing in the life of most past 75 that could be the basis for reasonable categorical desires and that in the absence of such desires, not doing what could easily save one's life could make sense. On the other hand, given that he is unwilling to commit suicide and so may remain alive when there is no threat to his life, he says he is willing to use palliative care to avoid pain and suffering. Presumably, he would also want to avoid boredom and get some enjoyment while alive, so he might do puzzles and read while waiting for death.

Hence, the satisfaction of conditional desires – including for negative objective goods like not being in pain and for positive ones like pleasurable sensations even caused by neural stimulation – could be what makes life not worse than death and so above zero on the x-axis Kagan uses. Yet the expected satisfaction of these desires would not ground reasonable categorical desires that make one want to go on living. This would provide an explanation of why, contrary to what Kagan suggests, life could be not worse and even (at least experientially) better than death and yet it could make sense from a purely self-interested point of view not to live on, even by refusing easy life-saving assistance.[18] In addition, Emanuel's particular view may be that one can have reasonable categorical desires only for things that can provide meaning in life (or meaningfulness in life) and that there are no such things in life past 75 (unless one is an outlier).

Emanuel might also (implicitly) tie the idea of meaning in life to the idea of dignity. It may be that one cannot lose one's dignity as a person simply because one has diminished capacities of the kind Emanuel has in mind. Nevertheless, living with diminished capacities may not befit someone who does retain his dignity as a person. (This is how I understand the complaint of those who say that they have 'lost their dignity' when they can no longer control their

[18] That the positive zone above zero should not be identified with lives worth living does not entail radical skepticism about using such graphs. By contrast Thomas Schramme thinks no justification of their legitimacy has been given. (See his 'Can We Measure the Harm (or Benefit) of Death?' in this volume.) I think their legitimacy can be justified in part by their according with intuitive judgments about lives not worth living including what sort of lives it would be wrong to create out of consideration for the being created (e.g.,lives with nothing but great suffering in them). The same holds for particular views about what lives are worth living. Suppose some great modern artist was so engrossed in the use of color that she never examined life or her life in particular. Should we think that her life was not worth living? If not, this casts doubt on the view that the unexamined life is not worth living.

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bodily functions, for example.) If one thinks that the dignity of the person requires that the life he leads have meaning in it, then the absence of what can give meaning in life could reasonably undermine categorical desires because further life would not be consistent with one's dignity as a person.

Before deciding whether a view like Emanuel's (as we have interpreted it) is correct, consider some contrasting views. We earlier discussed the idea of meaning in life given in the part of Gawande's book dealing with dying. In the section of his book dealing with those who are aged, Gawande offers a different idea of meaning in life that seems closer to Wolf's. He says this view is found in the work of Josiah Royce and it emphasizes pursuing goods outside oneself to which we attribute value (though, unlike Wolf, Gawande does not insist that the attribution must be correct). He also adds that these goods should be greater than oneself. However, the examples Gawande gives of pursuits that help the aged (even when demented) retain what he thinks of as meaning in life include taking care of a parakeet, maintaining plants, and interacting with children. A parakeet, plants, and children are not necessarily greater than oneself. Most importantly for the contrast with Emanuel, Gawande says that he is no longer afraid to grow old since he has seen how easy it is for the aged to retain meaning in life, for example by caring for a parakeet and interacting with others on this basis (2017, pp. 128–30). I think it is this very thing which eliminates Gawande's fear that frightens Emanuel, namely that he will become someone who will be experientially satisfied by pursuing something of as little worth as parakeet care and mistakenly (like Fulfilled Sisyphus) conclude that this provides meaning in his life. What Wolf says of Fulfilled Sisyphus (2010, pp. 23–24) would then apply to his own case: Going from 'being unhappy, bored, and frustrated to being blissfully fulfilled…actually makes his situation worse'. In not recognizing and responding correctly to the low or nonexistent worth of what he is doing 'he is either afflicted by mental illness or delusions or diminished in his intellectual powers'.

Wolf too considers a case of someone who feels fulfilled in devoting her life to the care of a small animal, in her case a goldfish. Wolf denies that this could provide meaning in the person's life. This conclusion could follow from considering only the properties of the activity itself and finding it lacking in objective worth. However, in response to comments by Nomy Arpaly, Wolf seems to revise her initial view of meaning in life that we have considered.[19] The woman in Wolf's

[19] See Arpaly's comments and Wolf's response in Wolf (2010).

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goldfish case had many other capacities that were not exercised in goldfish care and that could have led to doing other things of objective worth to ground fitting fulfillment. (Wolf also describes (2010, p. 24) Sisyphus in this way.) But Arpaly asks us to consider a mentally challenged child who exercises to the fullest all of his limited capacities in taking care of a goldfish and interacting with others around this interest of his. In response, Wolf agrees that this child does have meaning in life. She suggests that objective value may arise from objectively non-valuable pursuits (such as goldfish care or throwing a ball through a hoop) when they are done as rule-governed or other social activities.[20] An alternative interpretation of Wolf's view about the mentally challenged child is that she is relativizing the objective worth of an activity to the capacities of a person who engages in it and whether it fully exercises those capacities. On either interpretation she may agree with Gawande rather than Emanuel that an aged person whose capacities have diminished so far that they are fully exercised in parakeet care and social relations built around it can have meaning in life.

One problem is that neither interpretation of Wolf's response to Arpaly explains, at least in terms of having meaning in life, why we would want to have greater capacities and engage in activities whose intrinsic properties give them greater objective worth rather than have fewer capacities even if they are perfectly matched to intrinsically objectively less worthwhile activities (and are part of social and rule-governed enterprises). They also don't explain why, for the sake of the child or adult himself, we would want to improve his mental capacities, for example, by medical treatment. If we say that fewer capacities matched to intrinsically less valuable pursuits can provide no less meaning in life, we may again conclude that there is something else entirely than meaning in life (as Wolf understands it) that is important to us.

We have tried to better understand claims like Emanuel's and their relation to such (sometimes interrelated) ideas as meaning in life, categorical desires, and dignity. Now let us consider whether the claims are true. Do the pursuits open to people past 75 (excluding outliers) not have enough objective value to reasonably be objects of categorical desires? Considered on their own, it seems to me that reading, engaging in relationships, enjoying travel, and especially helping others with the skills one has developed in earlier work are worth doing and can provide reasons for going on in life. Can they always be the source

[20] Nathaniel Serio argues that this interpretation would lead one to conclude that Nazi Party activities can provide meaning in life. See his (2020).

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of meaning in life rather than mere enjoyment? Perhaps not, but even Wolf does not say that activities that provide meaning in life are the only ones that can give one a reason to go on living. In the case of people whose pre-75 life has failed to involve opportunities for enjoyable activities, it seems especially true that it is worth their living on to have these. In addition, living on merely for the sake of enjoyment taken in activities could be seen as something like a reward after a 'complete life' of high achievement.

Nevertheless, that whatever one does cannot provide meaning in one's life (in Wolf's sense) also seems to be a sufficient reason for not going on in life. This may be like the case of there being a sufficient reason to become a physicist and a sufficient reason to become an artist but some people are attracted to one sufficiently reasonable option and other people are attracted to another sufficiently reasonable option. Indeed for some getting satisfaction from goods of even considerable objective worth may not be possible after a complete life of extraordinary achievement. Suppose old Albert Einstein's loss of capacities leaves him only able to do bioethics at a high level. I assume that this activity is sufficiently objectively worthwhile to provide meaning in life on Wolf's account if someone can positively engage with it. However, given the (assumed) greater worth of his past activities, Einstein may not unreasonably be unable to positively engage with doing bioethics. Hence, doing bioethics would not provide him with fitting fulfillment.[21]

What of the relation of meaning in life to dignity of the person? It is not clear that only a life whose activities provide meaning in life (or meaningfulness in life) is consistent with the dignity of the person. This is so even if some pleasures are inconsistent with the dignity of the person (e.g., continuing on in life with only neural stimulation of pleasure centers in one's brain). In addition, Jeremy Waldron argues[22] that if conditions in old age arise that do not befit the continuing dignity of the person, a new form of dignity specific to old age can arise in confronting and coping with these conditions in a

[21] Perhaps even a radical change to something better from the type of person one has always been might sometimes provide a sufficient reason to not go on in what would still be literally one's own life. This is the so-called 'identity crisis' account of the reasonableness of not going on. For more on commitment to values that one is not rationally required to hold see *Almost Over*, Chapter 2.

[22] In his YTL Centre Annual Lecture, 'The Dignity of Old Age', at King's College London, July 8, 2021. My discussion here is based on my invited comments on that occasion.

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clear-eyed way. This would allow one, he thinks, to have age-specific dignity unto death obviating the need to use death as a way to avoid indignity. Does Waldron's argument succeed?

Notice that the dignity specific to old age that concerns Waldron involves an achievement such a coping and being clear eyed about one's choices and prospects. This is by contrast to the core notion of human dignity which does not depend on personal achievements.[23] Hence, some people might fail to achieve old age-specific dignity, for example, by denying the diminished worth of their activities or reality of their approaching death. Then they would live on without old age-specific dignity and could avoid this only by not living on. However, suppose some do achieve this sort of old age-specific dignity. Could it give them a reason to go on living rather than omit easy life-saving means? This would be so if achieving this dignity could be the object of a categorical desire. But it seems to me that achieving this sort of dignity in one's life is only the object of a conditional desire – something one should want if one must remain alive – but it is not reasonably the object of a categorical desire. (Could it be conditional in a stronger sense in that it may be a condition – a side constraint – on staying alive which is not true of all objects of conditional desires in Williams' sense?[24] That would be so if lacking old age-specific dignity were not only a sufficient reason not to go on living but a decisive reason not to go on living. It seems unlikely.that it is such a decisive reason.) In the absence of other desires or reasons to stay alive, that one will be able to deal with limitations in a way that gives rise to old age-specific dignity is not a reason for going on living. Suppose refusing easy life-saving measures is itself consistent with dignity of the person. Then the reasonableness of remaining alive rather than refusing such measures might be supported by either a simple desire to be alive or by some categorical desire whose satisfaction is still possible in old age. These points may also bear on the adequacy of Waldron's argumentative strategy. That is, he considers how dignity specific to old age can arise while going

[23] The distinction between dignity due to achievements and as a status had by all persons just in virtue of being a person is analogous to the distinction Stephen Darwall draws between respect for someone's achievement and respect for him as a person. See his (1977). Whereas Waldron speaks in terms of dignity relativized to specific periods of human life, Havi Carel makes similar points by speaking of exercising virtues (an achievement) relativized to dealing with various imperfections in human life. See her 'Meaning, Value, and the Imperfect Life', in this volume.

[24] See footnote 3 on the two senses of 'conditional'.

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on living (e.g., by unblinkingly dealing with limitations and approaching death) before discussing the option of avoiding the limitations by ending one's life (e.g., by assisted suicide) which he thinks could also be consistent with the dignity of the person. But it is possible that what has dignity when it is the only option available, lacks dignity when another option exists that is also consistent with dignity. That is, insisting on coping in a way that achieves old-age specific dignity in the absence of reasonable categorical desires to live on may no longer be dignified when there is an alternative of ending one's life consistent with dignity. Analogously, living with paralysis when it involves adjusting to limitations can involve the sort of dignity Waldron sees as specific to old age. But suppose there is a simple pill that could cure the paralysis. Refusing to take it could not only be against self-interest; it could make achieving dignity by dealing with the infirmity not dignified. The opportunity to deal with a problem needn't be better than getting rid of it in a way that is consistent with dignity. Waldron's approach of attending first to what he thinks is the dignity specific to old age independent of considering it in the context where other dignified ways of avoiding a life with limitations exist may be a mistake.[25]

I conclude that if dignity were threatened by having only categorical desires whose satisfaction cannot provide meaning in life, achieving the old age-specific dignity that Waldron has in mind would not itself provide a suitable categorical aim.

3. Conclusion

In sum, in this article I have suggested that there could be sufficient reason to go on living without meaning in life (e.g., for football and chocolate ice cream). It is not necessarily inconsistent with one's dignity to do so. Furthermore, that one will retain one's dignity if one goes on living is not itself a sufficient reason to go on. There

[25] Suppose Waldron thinks that dealing with conditions of frailty, dependency, and mental decline can provide dignity that makes old age not undesirable overall. He could still agree that these conditions in themselves are undesirable and curing people of them while they still live on is a worthy goal even if it eliminates the opportunity for gaining dignity by dealing with infirmities. Suppose it would be better for these conditions of old age to be replaced in this way. This at least conveys that relative to a cure of infirmities old age specific dignity is undesirable even if choosing it when one could be cured of infirmities did not undermine the dignity of dealing with the infirmities.

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could also be sufficient reason *not* to go on living (i) because of the absence of either meaning in life or conditions consistent with one's dignity and (ii) even though one could have meaning in life (e.g., when the latter arises from suffering in drug trials). Furthermore, many of the activities Emanuel takes to lack sufficient worth to ground either categorical desires or meaning in life may rather be activities with sufficient worth but with which someone with a particular past life may understandably not be able to positively engage.[26]

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[26] This paper draws on my discussion of Gawande and Emanuel in Chapters 3 and 6 of my (2020). Part of it was presented at the Royal Institute of Philosophy Annual Conference on Meaning in Life and the Knowledge of Death, July 2021. I am grateful to Prof. Michael Hauskeller for inviting me to speak. I am also grateful for the comments I received from other conference participants on that occasion and for written comments from Hauskeller and Peter Bauman.

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