Mattering That It's You

CHELSEA ROSENTHAL

Abstract

To live meaningfully, we can't just be receptacles for the right sorts of activities – it has to matter that it's us living our lives. Something is missing in valuable activities, if the same value could be achieved by anyone who performs the task. Meaningfulness requires that it be our own ideals, personalities, and priorities contributing to the value of what we do. Recognizing this can shed light on our relationship with meaning in three ways. First, it shows a distinctive reason that autonomy is important: what we do without autonomy will lack meaning. Second, it helps us understand a challenge we encounter when facing trade-offs between different types of meaning, navigating between opportunities to have a few of our characteristics matter widely (e.g., as a filmmaker or an activist) and intimate contexts in which much more of who we are matters to a small group of people. Finally, if living meaningfully involves our central characteristics shaping what's valuable about our actions, then discovering pre-set purposes (e.g., from fate, God, or the cosmos) might actually undermine our capacity to live meaningful lives.

1. Introduction

Just as critics of utilitarianism argue that people must be more than receptacles for happiness, I'll suggest that finding meaning in our lives requires that we're more than receptacles for meaning.[1] We shouldn't only hope for our lives to be sites for meaningful activities or have a meaningful structure – we want it be meaningful that it's *us*, with all our particulars, doing those activities and living that life.

[1] For discussion of this type of criticism, see (Regan, 1983, p. 205).

doi:10.1017/S0031819125100910 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Consider two cases.

Allison is participating in a mandatory year of service required by her government.[2] Her district chose to train many of the program participants to work on apps that will speed up processing of applications for government services. Allison's assignment involves coding for an app that gathers information from applicants for low-income, subsidized housing. The 'year of service' participants aren't given much discretion in how they approach their work – there are a lot of specific instructions and not much room for creativity. But the work is challenging – it holds Allison's attention in the way that completing an advanced crossword puzzle might, and she finds it reasonably interesting. Allison also believes the work is valuable – giving low-income people faster access to subsidized housing is important. Nevertheless, her experience feels a bit empty. In her more reflective moments, she is saddened to be spending a year of her life in a way that doesn't feel more meaningful.

Lizzie is a singer-songwriter who is currently on her first tour. She's gotten in touch with bars and coffeehouses and arranged gigs across a couple of neighboring states. She plays some covers, but also several songs she's written, many of them inspired by her own life. Some nights are disappointing, with few people in the venues and little interest from the audience. But she also has some lovely experiences with engaged listeners and notices that some of them start following her Instagram later. After one gig, she even talked with a woman who was processing a recent break-up and said she had found her new 'break-up anthem' in a song Lizzie wrote. Lizzie doesn't kid herself that she's changing the world, but getting to do that tour felt very meaningful to her.

Part of what distinguishes Allison's case from Lizzie's is that it doesn't matter very much who does Allison's work – it's just important that it gets done – while it makes a difference that it's *Lizzie* out on tour. Other singer-songwriters can also create something valuable, but the value of their work would be different. They would have different artistic sensibilities, express different ideals, and draw on different formative experiences. And, as a result, their work would

[2] Even apart from the problems with Allison's case, I take this type of mandatory service program to be straightforwardly authoritarian, but arguing for that is outside the scope of this paper.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contribute to different people's lives in different ways. Another musician's song likely wouldn't resonate in the same way with the woman who found her new 'break-up anthem,' but could contribute something else good or important. Characterizing two songs as having the same value would be peculiar in much the same way as saying that what's important or valuable about your relationship with your sister is the same as what's important or valuable about your relationship with your mother. (I'm here using 'same value' to refer not to the same magnitude of value, but to refer to the same content of the value.) So, the fact that it's Lizzie, with her particular characteristics, writing and performing her music is part of what gives that music the specific value it has.

By contrast, although Allison's work is engaging and valuable – and she recognizes that it's valuable[3] – Allison's central features (her ideals and commitments, her personality, the choices she makes about how to live her life) won't matter very much to what sort of value the work contributes to people's lives. She didn't choose to do that work, and she isn't exercising much discretion in how she does it. Similar value could probably be achieved by swapping in a different program participant to complete her assignment. And the value wouldn't just be of comparable magnitude – what specifically is valuable about the work would remain largely the same. This contrast can help to explain what unsettled Allison. When we crave meaning, one necessary (though likely not sufficient) condition of what we're craving is that central features of who we are become sources of value.

In the next section of the paper, I say a bit more about what I mean by 'mattering that it's us living our lives' and introduce some preliminaries and clarifications. Part 3 gives a more systematic argument for this requirement for meaning, by stepping back to consider two things that we hope to get from meaning in our lives and arguing that finding either of those things will have this prerequisite: we need to be sources of value – not just sites where valuable things take place.

In Part 4, I turn to showing how recognizing this can help us understand our relationship with meaning. First, it provides a

[3] In this sense, Allison's work seems to fulfill Susan Wolf's standards for meaning: she's actively engaged in a project of worth (Wolf, 1997, pp. 207–225). It's one that is both objectively valuable and subjectively valuable according to Allison's own lights. But I want to suggest that something is still missing.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

distinctive reason for the importance of autonomy: activities undertaken without autonomy will lack meaning. Second, it helps to reveal a key challenge we face when pursuing a meaningful life: there can be a significant tension between mattering widely, to many people (say, as an influential activist or an acclaimed filmmaker) and mattering for something closer to our full selves, in a way that's only possible in intimate relationships with people who know us very well. Finally, third, I make the case that, if meaning requires this role for our own central characteristics, then discovering a pre-set purpose for our life (fate or a purpose given by God or the cosmos, for example) would actually be an obstacle to having a meaningful life, rather than securing one for us. In Part 5, I address a potential worry about this way of thinking about meaning and discuss the implications of this view for experiences of art.

2. Mattering that It's You

I want to turn now to spelling out in more detail the idea that, to live meaningfully, we can't just be receptacles for the right sorts of activities (even well-structured receptacles) – it has to matter that it's *us* living our lives. By this, I mean that what we're doing wouldn't have the same value if it wasn't us, with our central characteristics, doing it – us doing an activity, being in a relationship, or living our life. This could be either because it would lack value without us or simply that the value would be very different. If we think of a variety of potentially meaningful activities – say, teaching kindergarten, performing as a singer-songwriter, or having dinner with your partner – in each of these cases, we can talk not just about whether the activity has value, but also about what value it has. And it's noteworthy that this value will differ substantially depending upon who is engaging in the activity. Two kindergarten teachers will influence their students in different ways, two singer-songwriters will have different emotional impacts on their audiences, and two partners will express their love differently over dinner. In each case, the particular value of the activity depends on important features of the person engaged in the activity – their personality, agency, ideals, and commitments – and in this sense, they aren't fungible.

By contrast, filling out bureaucratic forms or other rote tasks that don't allow for judgment calls or personal styles – the types of activities that are paradigmatically short on meaning – are activities whose value largely doesn't depend on who is doing them. Even when it's important to complete these tasks, little usually hinges on central

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

features of the people completing them, and often someone else could complete them with little difference. In this sense, important features of the person acting aren't the source of any value these activities have.

And meaning requires that the value in what we do must depend on important features of our identities[4] – not simply on rare traits that have little to do with who we are. If a particular person was needed for a task, but only because they are the tallest in their town, this wouldn't seem to indicate meaningfulness in the same way as, say, being needed by a friend who was seeking emotional support on a tear-filled night. An example that Robert Nozick briefly discusses brings this out well:

> If the cosmic role of human beings was … to provide needed food for passing intergalactic travelers who *were* important, this would not suit our aspirations – not even if afterwards the intergalactic travelers smacked their lips and said that we tasted good. The role should focus on aspects of ourselves that we prize or are proud of, and it should use these in ways connected with the reasons why we prize them. (It would not suffice if the exercise of our morality or intelligence, which we prize, affects our brain so that the intergalactic travelers find it more *tasty*.) (Nozick, 1981, pp. 586–587).

Nozick here is focused on the purpose of human life as a whole and the traits of humanity, but we might have a similar concern about the relevance of features of ourselves as individuals. I won't give exhaustive criteria for which features of ourselves play this role, but I take them to be those that are central to our identities – without which we'd worry that we wouldn't be ourselves. Paradigmatically, this could include our core ideals and commitments, central aspects of our personalities, and the way we exercise our agency to shape our lives. But these need not be static features – meaningful activities and

[4] Important features of our identities mattering to the value of our lives in this way is not best characterized as a form of authenticity. I'm concerned here with the impact of the characteristics we have here and now, whether or not those traits are authentic (either in the sense of reflecting an inner self or in the sense of reflecting an existentialist, creative endeavor). And if we are our authentic selves, that won't settle whether we have the opportunity to engage in activities or relationships in which our authentic characteristics matter and shape the value of what we do.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

relationships can, themselves, change our central characteristics, as Benjamin Bagley has suggested.[5]

The dynamic I've been describing – one in which the value of what we do depends on it being us doing it – can be a matter of degree. If, at work, you lead a meeting and have enough latitude to tell jokes that help people feel comfortable, that can be more meaningful than leading a meeting in which you are required to read announcements from a script that was provided to you. Your values, personality, and choices will play a larger role in the first case. But leading the humorous work meeting will still likely have less meaning than a heart-to-heart talk with your partner. The degree to which it matters that it's us can vary in two senses. First, it being you can have a larger or smaller impact on the value of what you're doing. In the meeting case, for example, you may have some discretion in how you run the meeting, but much of the meeting's content may be outside your control. Second, more and less central (or greater and fewer) aspects of your identity can impact the value of what you're doing. For example, you can bring some of who you are to the meeting when you decide to incorporate a few jokes, but there will also be important parts of your identity that shouldn't or can't shape the meeting. Much more of who you are will matter in the heart-to-heart talk with your partner.

This also helps to explain some intermediate cases in which the tasks, themselves, could be done similarly by many people, but a person's ideals and priorities still play a large role in their decision to undertake *that* task or contribute to *that* cause. In this sense, being one member of a crowd at a protest can be a deep reflection of your ideals, and choosing to participate in a religious ritual can have a meaning that it would lack if you were pressured into it. In the case of the protester or the voluntary ritual participant, central parts of who they are can matter to the choice to participate – and that can be meaningful – but those parts of themselves will matter in a more circumscribed way, because they can matter primarily to deciding to join, not to, say, the content of the ritual. So, there are some limits to the dimensions of meaning that are available in these cases.

Finally, because this is an argument about necessary, rather than sufficient, conditions, it is intended to be a view that can operate as a supplement to a variety of theories of meaningfulness, rather than requiring subscription to one in particular.

[5] I'm grateful to Benjamin Bagley for making this case in conversation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. We Can't Get What We Need from Meaningfulness Unless We're Sources of the Value in Our Lives

So far, I've appealed to some examples to offer initial, intuitive support for my account. But I want to turn now to developing a more principled explanation. To begin, let's consider two contexts in which people tend to go looking for meaning: moments when we feel small or insignificant in a big universe and moments when we feel doubts about the value of our lives and how we're living them. I'll argue that addressing either of these concerns requires that important features of us – our commitments and ideals, our personality, or our agency – are sources of meaning.

Questions about meaning can arise in a person's worries about the value of themselves and their lives – the sorts of doubts that arise on people's deathbeds, in moments of suicidality, and at life crossroads when people wonder if they've been living in the way they should. I take it that, when people reflect on meaning in moments like these, they are hoping, very broadly, to find reassurance that they really do matter or guidance for living in ways that make that self-valuing feel more justified.[6]

We want to value ourselves – I'll treat that much as a starting assumption about the condition of being human. But we don't only have emotions and commitments, we're also reasoning creatures. So, to sustain our sense of our own value, we need to find that valuing to be warranted. Following Samuel Scheffler's account of valuing, we can say that valuing ourselves doesn't only involve emotions and dispositions, but also a belief that we're 'good or valuable or worthy' (2011, p. 32). But whether or not we build this into the definition of valuing, there is a practical need: as reasoning creatures, it's difficult for us to sustain the emotions associated with valuing ourselves – particularly in the face of dark times and doubts – if we don't believe the emotions are reasonable and warranted.

So, what precisely, are we looking for from meaning, if it's going to help quell doubts about whether we matter or offer guidance or reassurance about our life paths? First, we'll want reasons to value ourselves – to see ourselves as worthy. This will require *us* to be sources of value. If it doesn't matter that it's *us* engaging in activities or living our lives – if we're interchangeable with others who could participate in the same activities – then affirmation of the value of

[6] For discussion of the relationship between meaning and guidance on how to live our life (a 'sense of direction'), see (Zhao, forthcoming).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular activities or life structures doesn't seem to be enough to reassure us of our own value. At most, it might justify valuing ourselves as useful, fungible entities, rather than justifying valuing all of ourselves, with all of our particulars – it can't explain why we would value ourselves for who we are.

Second, we'll want reasons to see it as valuable that we live in particular ways or engage in particular activities, because we don't just hope to affirm that we're worthy, but that we've been living well (or to determine what we should do differently to get ourselves onto a path where we are). For this, too, we need it to be the case that it matters that it's *us* doing what we do. If someone else could substitute in (maybe even doing better), without it changing or diminishing the value of our activities, it's not clear why it's so valuable for us, in particular, to be here doing them.

A similar need to be a source of value arises when we seek meaning as a way of coming to terms with feeling small or insignificant in a big universe.[7] In short, we hope that *we* still matter, in spite of the vastness of the universe – not just that we're sites where things that matter happen. This won't be an easy solution to the problem of insignificance, but any way of addressing the problem will at least require this much as a starting point. To better see why, let's look closer at what worries us when we feel insignificant.

We can understand this fear of insignificance in a big universe in two ways. First, in some cases contemplating the vastness of the universe simply forces reflection – from the imagined standpoint of far-flung galaxies, day-to-day pressures and distractions fall away and we lose access to social structures that let us pretend unimportant things hold high value. But when we sincerely believe in the value of what we're doing, this type of forced reflection shouldn't be much of a threat. Holding a loved one while they cry has value – whether or not strangers are invested in it. And hand-wringing over its insignificance in the Andromeda Galaxy would seem puzzlingly misplaced. As Thomas Nagel has suggested, when we're facing a crisis of meaning, our tiny size in a large universe doesn't, itself, seem to be the problem: 'if our lives are absurd given our present size, why would they be any less absurd if we filled the universe (either because we were larger or because the universe was smaller)?' (1971, p. 717).

[7] See Nozick's argument to this effect in (Nozick, 1981).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

On the other hand, there is a second way of understanding this fear that may get more traction. Much of what we do is *already* interwoven with something bigger or more temporally extended than ourselves – the question is whether it matters that it's us taking part. Sometimes we're fortunate and these are meaningful connections, and core features of our identities contribute to their value. As Samuel Scheffler has argued, many of the most meaningful aspects of our lives connect us with something outside ourselves, often that we hope will extend after our own deaths – projects that are collaborative or will bear fruit only many years from now, art that we hope will be appreciated far into the future, participation in traditions that will continue after our own time, or relationships with people who will carry our memory (2016).

But we also find ourselves shaped by larger, ongoing institutions and cultural forces to which we might matter very little. In the machinations of the U.S. Department of Education or major movie studios, for example, I'm largely irrelevant. People's professional or political opportunities may hinge on policies or institutions they have little hope of shaping. Their emotional lives or worldviews may be influenced by writers or artists who are unaware of their existence. In the face of dynamics like these, it's easy to feel small or powerless. And this feeling doesn't seem easily resolved by Nagel's remarks about absurdity not changing with size. We may not need to be important in Andromeda, but no one wants to feel irrelevant in their own lives. So, we can understand the problem of feeling insignificant in a big universe as an urge to matter to the forces that matter to us: to be part-authors of our own worlds (if only in a small way). (We can think of this as analogous to the value of participating in democratic self-government, rather than being subject to dictatorial power.) To achieve this – to be part-authors in this sense – it must be valuable that it's *us* participating in these wider institutions and cultural practices. And, in particular, we need to be able to exercise agency in a way that influences something bigger than ourselves (it wouldn't be enough to simply be famous for being tall, for example, if more central features of who we are were ignored). So, if it's fears of insignificance that drive our desires for meaning, it again looks like we'll need our central characteristics to matter to the value of what we do.

4. What We Learn from This Account

I want to turn now to describing three ways that this account can help us understand our relationship with meaning.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

4.1 Autonomy

First, briefly, if meaning requires that we're sources of the value in our lives, this gives us an additional explanation for the importance of autonomy. If we're left with little discretion over own lives, there is little room for core features of who we are to shape what we do and the value it has. This brings out one (though not the only) problem with failing to respect a person's autonomy, even when it leads them to perform objectively valuable activities. It disrupts their ability to derive meaning from those activities, because it makes them irrelevant to their activities.

For similar reasons, appreciating the link between meaning and being a source of value brings out some of the harm of increasing bureaucratization and of workplaces that leave people with little room for discretion in how they approach their work. Core features of who we are can't matter very much to the value of activities we do in compliance with an inflexible structure. For this reason, allowing people even modest space to exercise their own judgment or use their own signature approach to a task is crucial to alleviating feelings of disconnection from that work, if only to a small degree.[8] Modest improvements can come even from the simple difference of giving people enough space to become the employee who can comfort a stressed-out caller, rather than forcing them to be the employee who reads aloud from the same script issued to every employee.

4.2 Mattering widely and deeply

Next, we can shed light on a dilemma we face in pursuing meaning by recognizing two features of the dynamic I described above. On the one hand, we may hope to matter to the wider world that matters to us – to play a role in shaping the institutions and culture that shape us. On the other hand, we often want to matter and be appreciated for our full selves, not just a few flashy features. For example, we might be heartbroken to discover that our spouse thought of us as mainly as having impressive analytic skills or an original fashion sense. Traits like these can be important parts of a person's identity (they're likely more central than simply being tall, for example). But we'd hope that a spouse would think of us as more than a single attribute – even an important one – and appreciate a richer and more nuanced picture of who we are.

[8] See discussion of 'job crafting' in Dutton and Wrzesniewski (2020).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Recall that 'mattering that it's us' can come in degrees: there can be variation both in the extent to which the value of an activity is shaped by the fact that it's us doing it, and in how much of us (large portions or only limited slices) matters to it. As a result, we can face tensions between what I'll call 'mattering widely' and 'mattering wholly'. Important features of who we are can shape our activities' value in a way that matters to a large number of people or to larger cultural forces and institutions – that is, we can 'matter widely'. But there are also contexts in which large parts of who we are matter to what we're doing, not only one or two important personality traits or ideals we hold, but something closer to our full identities – that is, we can 'matter wholly' (or, more precisely, larger portions of our whole selves can matter).

The trouble is that it's difficult for us to matter both widely and wholly in the same activities. When someone directs an influential film or is a leader in an important activist movement, these may be paradigmatic cases of mattering widely. But, while important characteristics of the activist (say, their ideals or drive) may matter to the political changes they achieve, their sense of humor or patience with their toddler child may be irrelevant to their political work. Likewise, few of the film's viewers will have the time or interest in coming to understand the director's full identity in all of its complexity – that's a task that could only begin to be approached by someone with an extended, very intimate relationship to them.

On the other hand, close, intimate relationships to loved ones are paradigmatic contexts for mattering wholly but raise challenges for mattering widely: we might hope that a partner or family member would love us for who we are, for something at least approaching our full selves. But this doesn't 'scale up' well, and we can't realistically hope to form that type of connection with more than a handful of people at a time.

So, when we make choices about how to spend our time and energy, we don't only face choices between more and less meaningful options – we often face choices between pursuing activities in which we hope to matter widely and those in which we hope to matter wholly. This isn't all-or-nothing. Many lives will involve a combination of the two. However, I want to suggest that we sometimes make trade-offs between prioritizing mattering widely and prioritizing mattering wholly. Discovering the right balance between them isn't something we can settle by extolling the importance of meaningful living – because this is a trade-off between different forms of meaning.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This suggests that lives that make a big splash – bringing about large-scale social changes, revolutionizing a field, or doing the best or the most of something – won't straightforwardly be the most meaningful, even though these cases have become the clichéd examples of doing something meaningful.[9] They will be lives that excel at one type of meaning – mattering widely. But this doesn't settle whether the same people have found space for aspects of their lives in which they can matter wholly. And quieter lives can sometimes involve mattering more wholly in abundance. It's not obvious that we should think of these two ways of mattering as commensurable or how we would weigh them if we did.

These dynamics also help bring out why linking meaning to our own identities doesn't have to be worryingly self-centered. Meaningful lives often crucially involve close ties to other people or commitments to causes outside ourselves. But that shouldn't be a surprise on the view I've been defending. Close relationships are frequently the context in which we matter most wholly. And we tend to see loved ones as irreplaceable (Bagley, 2015; Frankfurt, 1998). Even though we can form significant ties with multiple people, no one will bring precisely the same perspectives, ideals, and shared histories to those relationships.

Likewise, doing work for communities and causes bigger than ourselves is often where we can matter especially widely, playing a role in shaping our world. And which commitments we choose – and how we approach the work – is often impacted by our most closely-held ideals. So, again, the fact that it's us makes a big difference. By contrast, when we're working for a valuable cause, but it wasn't one we chose, the prospects for meaning do genuinely seem diminished (this was, for example, part of the problem with Allison's work during her mandatory year of service).

Nevertheless, I'm not recommending that people persistently focus their mental lives on whether a particular activity or relationship is one in which it matters that it's them engaging in the activity or relationship. Doing *that* might be objectionably self-centered or at least, in Bernard Williams's words, 'one thought too many' (1981, p. 18). And while I've argued that meaningfulness requires that we are sources of value – that it matters that

[9] For a different type of argument for the meaningfulness of ordinary lives, see Glasgow (2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it's us – I'm not suggesting that this is *sufficient* for meaningfulness. Other aspects of these activities and relationships can also be crucial.

4.3 Pre-set purposes undermine meaning

Finally, a key upshot of this account is that one traditional type of answer to questions about meaning becomes much less viable. People have often hoped to resolve worries about meaning in their lives by uncovering a pre-set purpose assigned to them by external forces: the life that God intended them to live, a sense of fate, a cosmic purpose that gives their life (or human life in general) a point. Contemporary work on meaning often begins from concerns about how we should proceed, if we face a (putatively depressing) lack of these straightforward answers. But, a surprising implication of my account is that we don't need to mourn the absence of pre-set, externally-imposed purposes, since they would not answer our need for meaning even if we had them. Indeed, if we don't have this type of pre-set purpose, that should be a relief, rather than a tragedy, because such purposes would pose significant obstacles to our attempts to find meaning in life.

A life guided by a purpose we didn't choose, or following a script we didn't write, is one where our core ideals and commitments – and the choices we make based on them – aren't relevant. In our starting example, we considered someone who was doing socially useful routinized work because it was required as part of a mandatory year of service. I've raised worries that, even if the work is interesting and valuable, its value will have relatively little to do with the person doing the work – and will be less meaningful as a result. Living in a particular way because it corresponds to a pre-set, cosmic purpose has the same structure: following the instructions of an external source (whether God, fate, or the government). Our agency and the core ideals and commitments we hold wouldn't matter to the value of our life or activities, because the pre-set purpose of our life would settle what choices we should make or what we should prioritize in order to arrive at the most valuable options.[10] In this sense, discovering our cosmic purpose would be a bit like finding out that we're

[10] In this way, the implications of this view dovetail with existentialist discussions of freedom. For an overview, see Aho (2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nozick's high-end alien food, because important parts of ourselves would be irrelevant.

Of course, other things about you could matter to your ability to fulfill your purpose or could make you suited to that purpose – your skills for example, or aspects of your personality involving involuntary behaviors or reactions, rather than active choices. And it might matter if you're the sort of person who derives guidance from your cosmic purpose rather than trying to resist it.[11] But for most of us, even if we're not rebels in the face of cosmic destiny, that's a limited part of who we are. So, while smaller portions of ourselves might remain significant, many of our deepest commitments and ideals would seem irrelevant in the face of a pre-set purpose that determines how we should live. For that reason, a pre-set purpose would be a threat to meaning, rather than a ticket to it.

5. Experiencing What We Didn't Create

I'll close by turning to a worry: even if it matters that it's us engaged in our projects or relationships, it's less clear whether it matters that it's us experiencing things we had no hand in creating – beautiful or moving art, for example. It might seem that any viewers of same film, or hikers appreciating the same natural beauty, are interchangeable. And yet, some experiences like these can make our lives more meaningful. Recent work from Jing Hwan Khoo particularly makes the case that appreciating something that we didn't create is actually central to meaning (Khoo, MS). But even on theories that give it a less central role, ruling out its meaning seems like a mistake.

I want to suggest that the view I've provided can account for the meaning in appreciating what we didn't create – and can actually help explain a key difference between those instances that seem meaningful and those that perhaps don't. Sometimes we *do* bring who we are to these experiences – someone with different dispositions or values might have very different thoughts or feelings while watching the same film or listening to the same music.[12] In this sense,

[11] In this sense, similar obstacles to meaning arise whether or not determinism holds; if we hope to find meaning by taking guidance from a cosmic purpose, then we would have to actually take that guidance – freely or not – and doing that would be enough to make our actual ideals and commitments superfluous.

[12] Indeed, Alexander Nehamas has argued that our aesthetic tastes are, themselves, an important part of who we are, and having different aesthetic tastes follows naturally from having different identities (2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who is experiencing the art can matter to what's valuable about the experience. And this doesn't have to be limited to consumption of 'high art.' We can also find meaning in being the sort of person who shouts the same joke back at the screen every time we watch our favorite low-brow comedy and being reminded of the way we've enjoyed it with our best friend. That too, is a way of experiencing the movie as us – where the fact that it's us watching shapes what's valuable about watching it.

This is especially clear when we remember that the characteristics we bring to our experiences need not be fixed in advance of the experience. One key way in which it might matter that it's us experiencing art is if it influences who we are and what characteristics or ideals we have going forward. (Indeed, as Benjamin Bagley has argued, whether something changes us might even be central to whether it's meaningful.)[13]

Thinking about whether it matters that it's us having an experience can also help us understand which cases of experiencing others' creations will be meaningful. As I've already suggested, this doesn't need to track the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. Instead, whether it matters that it's *us* consuming something can, like in other cases, set a minimum requirement for meaningfulness (a necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, condition). When we're having a distinctive experience whose value depends on central features of who we are, experiencing art in this way is potentially meaningful. On the other hand, not all experiences of others' creations are so personal and shaped by important features of our own identities. We can have enjoyable moments that are, nevertheless, impersonal and so less meaningful (I take this to be a matter of degree). Examples might include experiences that we use to quiet our brains more than to engage actively (say, blandly pleasant shows or the sorts of games that we use to 'turn off' for a bit). Similarly, experiences that induce pleasant brain chemicals, without much room for distinctions between our own experiences and those with the same rush of dopamine, might seem lighter on meaning.

For discussion of why this link between identities and aesthetic preferences is compatible with universalism about aesthetic value, see Alex King's argument in (2024).

[13] See Ft. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

6. Conclusion

I've suggested that living meaningfully requires key parts of who we are to be sources of the value in our lives. And the needs that drive us to look for meaning will be difficult to satisfy without this. I hope recognizing this dynamic can help make sense of many of our felt needs, but also reveal that what meaning requires will sometimes be quite the opposite of what was supposed. It helps explain the relationship between autonomy and meaning and brings out some difficult trade-offs between mattering widely and mattering wholly. But it also suggests that if we could find the type of cosmic purposes or plans from God that are sometimes thought to be the key to meaning, it would actually endanger our search for meaning.[14]

References

Kevin Aho, 'Existentialism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/.

Benjamin Bagley, 'Loving Someone in Particular', *Ethics*, 125:2 (2015), 477–507.

Jane E. Dutton and Amy Wrzesniewski, 'What Job Crafting Looks Like', *Harvard Business Review* (2020), https://hbr.org/2020/03/what-job-crafting-looks-like.

Harry Frankfurt, 'On Caring', in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 155–180.

Joshua Glasgow, 'The Ordinary Meaningful Life', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 9:3 (2023), 408–425.

Jing Hwan Khoo, 'In Praise of Being Just This, Merely This' (Manuscript).

Alex King, 'Universalism and the Problem of Aesthetic Diversity', *The Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 10:2 (2024), 313–332.

Thomas Nagel, 'The Absurd', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 68:20 (1971), 716–727.

Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Robert Nozick, 'Philosophy and the Meaning of Life', in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 571–647.

[14] For feedback on this project, I'm very grateful to Daniela Dover, Jordan MacKenzie, Benjamin Bagley, and the audience at the 2023 Conference in Honor of Sam Scheffler at Berkeley. I am indebted to the research assistance of Jing Hwan Khoo.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
Samuel Scheffler, 'Valuing' in *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T.M. Scanlon*, eds. R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 23–42.
Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, ed. Niko Kolodny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character, and Morality', in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–19.
Susan Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 14:1 (1997), 207–225.
Michael Zhao, 'Meaning, Purpose, and Narrative', *Nous* (forthcoming).

CHELSEA ROSENTHAL (crosenth@sfu.ca) *is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Simon Fraser University.*

Author Notes
This article's licence allows the author to grant permission for adaptation and/or commercial use. It is the author's preference to be contacted directly for permission requests.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819125100910 Published online by Cambridge University Press