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Achievement and the Meaning of Life

Why achievement?

Until relatively recently, there was very little discussion directly concerning achievement in philosophical literature about wellbeing or value.¹ But one place where achievement continues to be a central part of discussion is in the literature about the meaning of life.² The meaning of life literature in contemporary philosophy isn’t particularly abundant itself, but it is here where there is far more discussion of achievement than in the literature on wellbeing or other areas of value. In many discussions of meaning in life, achievement, or something very much like it, is a central element, playing a key role in the account of meaning. Most obviously is Susan Wolf’s account, that meaning in life amounts to engaging in projects of “objective worth.” John Cottingham includes something similar in his account, and there many other discussions, including one by Neil Levy, which I will discuss shortly.

But for all this, there isn’t a lot of discussion about precisely what amounts to having “objective worth.” So today I’m going to take a stab at an account of one way (among several, mind you) in which achievements can have objective worth, and I will say a little something about why this particular sort of achievement makes them especially good sources of meaning.

I will have floating in the background some assumptions. First, that worthwhile projects and a subjective sense of fulfillment are both components of meaning in life, and second, that there is a relationship between the objective component and intrinsic value.³ The final assumption is that achievements are valuable virtue of *challenge*, inter alia. I motivate this claim a little bit later on (and elsewhere in other work).⁴ Beyond these assumptions I aim to remain neutral about

¹ The few discussions of achievement in wellbeing include (Hurka 1993), (Keller 2004), (Portmore 2007). But soon there will be more (Bradford 2015).

² For example, (Wolf 1997 and 2010), (Cottingham 2003), (Brogaard and Smith 2005), (James 2005), (Levy 2005). Even if not explicitly called “achievement,” certain projects or endeavours of one sort or another figure prominently in these and other discussions.

³ This is really a discussion about a way in which certain kinds of achievements are intrinsically valuable.

⁴ I defend this at great length elsewhere (2012, 2015). To briefly motivate this idea, we can see that achievements are not, as one might think, valuable in virtue of the good that they bring about, since many paradigmatic achievements result in no good at all (e.g., climbing a mountain). Such achievements seem to be valuable not in spite of their difficulty, but at least in part because of it. The most central characteristic of these and all achievements is their difficulty, so it is plausible that difficulty, or challenge, is a central element in the account of the value of achievement. One might ground the value of difficulty in, say, a perfectionist story of the exercise and development of human capacities.

further substantive details, and so precision may be sacrificed for ecumenism. My aim is not to establish that achievements are indeed part of an account of meaning in life; rather, assuming that they are, I take up the question of which kinds of achievements are the best sources of meaning.

Mill's Crisis

A natural thought is that the achievements that are the most objectively worthwhile and the most significant for meaning are those that accomplish some great good. Projects such as developing a cure for cancer, resolving social injustices, or building schools for needy children are the sorts of achievements that one would expect to find at the center of an account of projects of objective worthwhileness. No one would deny that these projects are valuable and can be superlatively meaningful. But does an achievement need to bring about some great good in order to be meaningful? Surely, one might think, it must – to have a real purpose means that your achievements “come to something.”

Yet this is mistaken. That a project “come to something” is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be meaningful. The crisis suffered by John Stuart Mill as he describes it in his *Autobiography* is a telling illustration. Mill asks himself:

‘Suppose that all your objects in life were realised; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?’ And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, ‘No!’ At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end (Mill 1989 [1873], p. 112).

Mill subsequently has something of a breakdown, overwhelmed by the sense that his aim has now “lost its charm” and seems worthless and “tragic” (1989 [1873], p. 112).⁵ There are many lessons we might draw from Mill’s crisis. Most straightforwardly, it illustrates an instance where achievements of objective worth – specifically achievements that result in some great good – are not sufficient for meaning. I will highlight two further insights: first, what it is about achievement that is significant; and second, how certain kinds of objectively worthwhile projects are better sources of subjective engagement than others.

Mill’s crisis supports the observation that there is something significant about the *pursuit* that is distinctive from the finished product when he realizes that his sense of purpose springs from the *pursuit* of a goal that is far away, independently from the accomplishment of the aim. It suggests that it is the pursuit

⁵ Following the passage, Mill asks the following rhetorical question, which I think complicates how we might understand his concerns: “The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means?” One way of taking the concern is that Mill no longer seems his goals as valuable or worth pursuing, and as a result, the pursuit is uninteresting. This is a different worry than what I take up. I take Mill’s concern as the realization that he wasn’t driven by the thought that the goal was important to be realized, but driven by the pursuit, illustrating that the pursuit of a goal can be meaningful independently from its accomplishment. Regardless of whether this was precisely what Mill felt it seems to be an important insight. This seems to be how Levy also understands Mill’s crisis, as I discuss below.

that is the source of significant meaningfulness, rather than the completed accomplishment.

This is a surprising insight. The natural thought is that the *good* that results from an achievement is the source of its meaning. But achievements that result in some good – obviously the best sorts of achievements by Mill’s utilitarian standards – are not, it would seem, the only or best candidates for achievements that are exceptionally meaningful. For meaning, not only must our projects be objectively worthwhile, but also the engagement that we experience with them must inspire in us a sense of purpose. Mill, in supposing what he will feel when his aims are achieved, does not anticipate feeling his purpose fulfilled, but rather the opposite – depleted. Although projects that result in great good may be better along other dimensions, and are objectively worthwhile, it is not the case that they are also always the best projects for meaning.

Putting aside for a moment the subjective component of meaning and Mill’s crisis, we can see that objectively worthwhile achievements are not *only* those achievements that result in some good. The notion that an achievement must “come to something” in order to be worthwhile is mistaken. There are many paradigmatically valuable achievements that don’t amount to anything beyond their own execution. Two mountain climbers recently scaled the sheer 3 000 foot rock El Capitan at Yosemite, using nothing more than their hands and feet to climb over the course of 19 days, an achievement for which they were congratulated by the President.⁶ This remarkable achievement was clearly valuable and deeply meaningful for the climbers. Yet its value has nothing to do at all with any resulting good apart from its own undertaking. Other paradigmatic achievements are similar in this respect, such as running a marathon, mastering a new language, or, arguably, learning to play a musical instrument.

Indeed, it can be said that if achievements have any features in common that characterize them as achievements, it is that they are *challenging*. [I defend this at greater length in other work, and welcome questions during the Q and A] but let the claim suffice for now that achievements are characterized by difficulty. The challenge of achievements – as is illustrated by the climbers in Yosemite – is a source of what makes them worthwhile projects, regardless of whether or not they result in some further good. Challenge *itself* grounds the value of achievements.⁷ Of course, other elements of achievements are relevant for their value as well. I don’t deny that resulting in some further good *also* may add to the value of an achievement. But it isn’t necessary – the value of achievement is characterized at least in part by the challenge of the process, regardless of any further good.

Let’s return to Mill’s crisis. The first lesson I have drawn is that there is something significant about the process of achievement beyond its product. I motivated the notion that it is *challenge* that is the source of achievement’s value.

⁶http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/15/sports/tommy-caldwell-and-kevin-jorgeson-relax-finally-and-talk-about-climbing-the-dawn-wall.html?_r=0,
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/01/150114-climbing-yosemite-caldwell-jorgeson-capitan/>

⁷ But surely, the obvious objection goes, not every challenging project is worthwhile – what about Rawls’ grass counter, or walking from Oxford to London on your hands? I have much more to say about this and do so in *Achievement*, OUP 2015.

The second lesson to draw from Mill's crisis is that a process with a certain structure is a particularly good source for *meaning*.

What is this structure and why is it a better source for meaning?

The rough idea is that significantly meaningful achievements are characterized by a structure that is such that completing the goal is unimaginable, in a manner of speaking.⁸

This idea is suggested by Neil Levy in his paper about meaningfulness in life. I think this idea is very compelling, and, since Levy doesn't spell out in precise detail exactly what this structure amounts to and why it is so significant for meaning, I am going to take a run at it. Just what does this amount to – what exactly is it for the completion of an achievement to be unimaginable? And, more importantly, *why* is this a characteristic of superlatively meaningful achievements? I will take up the first of these questions now and develop an account of this structure, and in the following section account for why this structure can impart significant meaning.

Mill's crisis arises when Mill *imagines* his projects completed. So the inspiration for Levy is that truly ("superlatively") meaningful projects have goals that we cannot "imagine completing" (Levy 2005, p. 183). The idea isn't simply that we couldn't imagine completing the goal - I couldn't imagine completing a five-thousand-piece jigsaw of a sand dune, but that doesn't make it a superlatively meaningful achievement. Nor is the idea that attaining the goal is unimaginable because it is by its nature simply impossible to complete. This would describe Sisyphus' goal, and it of course is the archetype of meaninglessness.

Rather, the idea is that the project has a certain structure in light of the nature of the goal – the goal develops and expands as we approach it. As we make progress toward the goal, new aspects of the goal emerge and so the pursuit expands. Our understanding of what would amount to completion of the goal changes as we progress; hence its completion is unimaginable in this way. Because the goal develops as we make progress toward it, a complete picture of the completed goal can't be held in mind with precise detail.

Here is how I will put it. Goals are *self-propagating* when the standards for success develop as progress is made toward the goal. These goals are *self-propagating* because the nature of the goal gives the activity of its pursuit this structure. These goals are *propagating* in that they expand and develop. The contention is that this self-propagating structure is a key for projects of exceptional meaning.

The pursuit of knowledge illustrates this structure perfectly. The more we explore an area of inquiry and the more we learn about it, the more that new questions arise. The boundary, as it were, of what we can know recedes the closer we get to it.

A scientist, for example, might have a project to understand some aspect of the natural world. Typically in academia, science progresses by way of studies with findings suitable for publications in academic journals – not expanding goals, but discrete, short-term goals, yet typically these smaller projects are part of a more

⁸ Levy acknowledges that some superlatively meaningful goals *may* be such that their completion is imaginable, such as "communion with God." (Levy 2005, p. 184). Levy says that what distinguishes superlatively meaningful completable goals from those that are not superlatively meaningful is that the accomplishment of the former continues to imbue one's life with meaning.

expansive aim.⁹ For the most part, the goals of scientists are broad, and as progress is made on a particular study, the next steps toward the new goal become clear. Hypotheses are confirmed or not, opening and closing different avenues of exploration.

The structure is not unique to projects of inquiry. Creative artistic endeavors are also paradigmatic self-expanding goals. An artist may have a particular vision for a piece, but typically once the creative enterprise is underway, the conception of the finished product itself is calibrated and refined. On a larger scale, an artist's overall goal may not have a neatly comprehensible finish line. An artist may aim to create a body of work that establishes a certain vision and resonates a certain way with the audience and with art history. Completing this goal isn't something that's neatly imaginable – one can touch it with fingertips, but not envision completion with comprehensive detail from all sides.

This structure can take shape in light of how we understand and set our goals. Goals, after all, are set by us – that is, one *takes on* a project and thereby chooses or accepts certain goals, and so what constitutes the goal is a matter of how you understand the goal.¹⁰ The degree to which a goal expands is a function of how we understand our goal as we set and pursue it. We could, for example, set a goal to learn the number of stars in the Milky Way and google it.¹¹ This would not be a self-propagating goal. But if the goal we set is to comprehend the universe in the way made possible by physics as a science, then it would be. Even a slightly more modest project in physics (for example, “to understand the most elementary constituents of matter”) has a goal that is self-propagating in the relevant way.

To be precise, the claim is that this structure is a key feature of many projects that are exceptionally meaningful. It's not necessary since it is possible that achievements can be meaningful, even exceptionally so, without this structure, such as those with very valuable products such as developing a cure for cancer. Whether it is sufficient depends on some details I won't have time to resolve today.¹² So the

⁹ For example, here is the goal of the nuclear and particle physics research lab at Rice University: “In the Bonner Lab we are trying to understand the most elementary constituents of matter.” The lab then breaks down their goals: “We attempt to answer such questions as: How did the universe come to be? Are there undiscovered principles of nature?” and so forth, and then finally “We do so by participating in the experiments that are underway to study these and other questions.” <<https://physics.rice.edu/Nuclear.aspx>>

¹⁰ To be precise, *typically* goals are set by us. Sometimes goals are given rather than chosen, and it seems possible that we might pursue or attain a goal even if we haven't chosen it for ourselves. It does seem that for something to count as a goal for you, though, at least some element of your endorsement of it, or taking up of it, is necessary. It's not necessary that we explicitly endorse our goals, however, as I discuss later.

¹¹ A surprisingly difficult question to answer, according to space.com, so it can be taken up as a self-propagating goal after all. Estimates are between 100 billion and 400 billion. <<http://www.space.com/25959-how-many-stars-are-in-the-milky-way.html>>

¹² For instance, one might wonder whether an evil goal that is self-propagating could have exceptional meaning. There are two different lines of argument to support that it could. First, evil projects could have meaning on a certain conception of understanding “meaning” that includes negative value as a candidate for meaning. (This is a surprisingly intuitive position – when asked to generate a list of meaningful events, the students in my class named far more negative events, such as WWII, 9/11, and funerals of loved ones, than they did positive ones.) Alternatively, assuming that meaning is related to positive value, one can

claim is that this structural feature is *typical* of projects that are exceptionally meaningful. In talking about projects with “exceptional” or “superlative” meaning, I am making claims about how *much* meaning a project has. Some projects that do not have the self-propagating structure may have so much meaning as to count as exceptional. But my claim is that this structure imbues meaning in a particularly interesting and rich way.

Now, we don’t always have a particular goal in mind as we pursue our various endeavours – what’s your goal in doing philosophy, for example? It doesn’t seem to be necessary to have reflected on it explicitly in order to see that you have a goal. It might be as general as “to make a contribution.” Or perhaps the *prima facie* modest goal “to figure out some things that seem true about X, and support them with some good arguments.” Depending how widely you cast your X, this goal on its own may fit the bill for an exceptionally meaningful project. A goal to figure out some things that seem true about the nature of intrinsic value, or the mind body problem, or the nature of causation – you will probably find yourself with a receding finish line whether you like it or not, and hence an exceptionally meaningful project.¹³ So you need not actively reflect on your goal in order for it to have the kind of structure I have in mind.

Now one might think that we’re in danger here of describing the opposite of a meaningful project – doesn’t this sound awfully Sisyphean, pursuing a goal that expands almost infinitely, and so its completion recedes further and further away?

The self-propagating structure isn’t simply such that the goal *recedes* and is unattainable, which might very well be Sisyphean. Rather, the idea is that the goal *develops*, and as progress is made toward the goal, new goals emerge, or new aspects of the goal emerge. Think of it like new levels in a video game, or new editions of Trivial Pursuit, or new, deeper, and more enriched levels of interpreting poetry or art. The more you accomplish, the more is possible for you to accomplish. In this respect, progress is made. As you move along toward the goal, you can turn around and look back and see what you have accomplished from where you started. You can rightly say that you have made progress and from this new point, you can see what’s possible for you now to do would not have been possible earlier. For example, as a philosopher, you can see that since you started in your philosophical studies, you have established and defended some claims, or developed and defended a view. At the very least, your understanding of the space of views on a topic is refined and the merits and pitfalls of the views are understood more clearly. Further, you can now

argue that projects with evil goals can have positive value. Having such a self-propagating structure would be a way that a project with an evil goal could have at least some positive value, even if it is overall negative. Of course, depending on how the numbers work out, some evil achievements could have positive value, and therefore could have meaning (given the assumption that meaning is a matter of positive value). So evil self-propagating goals *could* have exceptional meaning. However, since on balance some evil self-propagating projects may have more bad than good, this would mean the self-propagating structure is not sufficient for exceptional meaning.

¹³ That’s not to say that any project in philosophy (or inquiry or art or what have you) will be exceptionally meaningful. So if your goal in philosophy is “to figure out some things that seem true about X, and support them with some good arguments” and you cast X very narrowly and set the bar pretty low for “some things that seem true” and “good arguments” you can accomplish this by writing a typical introductory undergraduate philosophy essay. This might be somewhat meaningful, but perhaps not exceptionally so.

see the possibility of making new arguments that would not have been possible at the earlier stage.

We can see how this would characterize other kinds of projects as well. A playwright early in his career has only a rudimentary grasp of how to establish character, craft plot, effectively set scenes and so forth. As he goes along in his career he develops more sophisticated abilities. His overall goals of developing a corpus of work develops and expands as each new play that he writes is better and better. The plays he writes later in his career wouldn't have been possible for him to write early in his career. As progress is made, new opportunities for progress open up.

Developments in methodology can also constitute progress. A project may involve a certain methodology and while the project is ongoing, we uncover *better ways* to accomplish the goal, better methods for engaging in the activities central to the project.

But there is also an opposite objection. Far from being Sisyphean, we might think that there are no goals that recede far enough. It might be the case that even philosophy can be exhausted – the answers are out there somewhere, presumably. One might think that there are as a matter of fact no projects that really have the structure self-propagating structure and there is an end to everything. Our inability to conceive the goal is simply a matter of ignorance, and this ignorance isn't enough to give our pursuit the superlatively meaningful structure.

But in fact I think our ignorance *is* enough to give our pursuits the self-propagating structure. It is precisely because we don't know what our completed goal will be like that allows it to develop as we get closer.

Another concern is that there is something perverse about protracted goals. There is something very peculiar about saying that an achievement is more meaningful the longer it's dragged out, particularly if the project in question is, say, a cure for cancer, or stem cell research, the upshots of which will save lives and improve quality of life for many people.

But of course there are many *different* reasons why we should undertake projects and many reasons why we should complete them, and the reasons in many of these cases are from sources other than their suitability as sources of meaningfulness in our lives. Additionally, significant meaning can also be found in discrete projects with non-self-propagating goals that culminate in an outcome of significant value, as acknowledged earlier. The main drawback from discrete projects is illustrated by Mill's crisis. The malaise and let-down from realizing that one's personal fulfillment comes in the pursuit, not the product, which means that discrete projects, however significant, are not perpetual sources of meaning within one's life. In this respect, projects with self-propagating goals are superior choices. And of course, discrete projects, such as developing a cure for cancer or correcting a social injustice may be taken up as part of broader goals that are self-propagating. Most obviously, there seems to be an endless supply of social injustices to correct.

One might still worry that there is something irrational about self-propagating goals. One might think that any reasonable goals that we might set could in fact be completed. Even if there are goals that could be self-propagating, the only reasonable goals to take up are those that are in fact completable. If a goal is impossible to attain such as walking to the moon or making a square circle, it's irrational. So the only rational projects have goals that are possible to complete, and so self-propagating goals are irrational to take up. The concern might be that it's

irrational to take on goals that are not possible *for you* to complete. That's clearly false, since we often work in groups and there seems to be nothing irrational about that; nor is there something irrational about initiating a project with a plan that is going to be completed by others in the future. There is nothing irrational about this at all.

The better way to put the concern is that it is irrational to take up self-propagating goals because they are, by their nature, impossible for you or anyone else to accomplish, such as making a square circle or walking to the moon. But it's not the case that self-propagating goals are impossible to accomplish in the way that conceptually or nomologically impossible tasks are impossible. We can't even try to make progress on impossible tasks such as making a square circle, whereas we can take steps toward self-propagating goals. Moreover, the progress that we make toward these goals is genuine, and we accomplish sub-goals along the way. In contrast, impossible goals do not have sub-goals that contribute to their fulfillment and so we cannot make genuine progress. A physicist's overall goal to understand the fundamental particles of the universe might never be reached fully, but publishing a dozen papers reporting the findings of at least some clues about their nature is something; moreover, it's progress in way that one could not make progress toward walking to the moon. The fulfillment of self-propagating goals is not impossible to conceive in the way that making a square circle is not. Completion of a self-propagating goal is not fully graspable, but nevertheless we can conceive it in some sense, enough to touch with our fingertips if not wrap our arms around it.

In exceptionally meaningful achievements, a particular conception of what would satisfy completing the goal changes and expands once we draw near to its completion. At any stage along the way what amounts to final completion isn't imaginable with precise detail. Once early sub-goals are completed, these open up the possibility of new goals. Exceptionally valuable achievements are those that have goals that have a very high degree of this self-propagating nature.¹⁴

I find this deeply compelling. Self-propagating goals do indeed appear to be characteristic of superlatively meaningful endeavours. But it needs a deeper explanation. What is it about this structure that is so special?

But why?

First I will look briefly at two ways in which the structure of self-propagating goals is extrinsically significant, and then turn to describe what I think is important about the structure itself.

First, and perhaps most obviously, self-propagating goals are significant because of their instrumental significance. Challenge is *itself* worthwhile and assuming this is true, projects with self-propagating structures provide a perpetual source of valuable challenge. Because self-propagating goals give a renewable source of challenge, which is worthwhile, they also provide a renewable source of a merited sense of purpose. Overall self-propagating goals provide both a decently objectively

¹⁴ The goal need not expand limitlessly. We might say the more the structure of the pursuit propagates, the better. That is, exceptionally meaningful achievements are those that have goals that have a very high degree of this self-propagating structure.

worthwhile project, and accordingly, an appropriate source for merited subjective sense of purpose, thus scoring top marks on these two aspects of meaning.¹⁵

As a source of challenging and therefore worthwhile activity, a project with a self-propagating goal provides a reliable source of this worthwhile activity in contrast to a discrete project, at the very least because it lasts longer. Of course, there is no reason why a series of discrete projects pursued in succession could not provide just as much valuable activity. Even so, the self-propagating goal, unlike the discrete projects, structures our challenging activities in a way that constitutes *progress*. These projects aren't simply never-ending, but expanding. It is reasonable to think that progress contributes significance and value to our achievement, and because this progress is accumulated over the long term of the self-propagating project, it has an advantage along this dimension in contrast to the discrete projects. Moreover we may accrue significance in other ways – our lives become unified when we have long-term projects, and this can be a source of significance.

The second extrinsic respect in which self-propagating goals are especially significant is that the ever-receding structure is typical of many projects that have superlative value in other ways. Intellectual inquiry, artistic projects, and so on, are all examples of self-propagating structure. These projects have more in common than just the self-propagating structure: they are also *independently* significant, or so it's plausible to think. The structure is typical of these kinds of projects because they are so significant. Because the goals that are at stake in, say, art or philosophy or science, the goals are gigantic – we can touch them with our fingertips but we can't wrap our arms around them.¹⁶ Because they are themselves domains of such incredible value that any human-scale project can come nowhere near exhausting them; they are all so rich that we can never exhaust them. So the self-propagating structure here is a *sign* of value. It is a feature in common of projects in superlatively rich domains.

But the point that I really want to make concerns the significance of the structure itself. Beyond its extrinsic significance, the structure itself imbues projects with value.

In choosing a project that is a renewable source of challenge, and choosing it at least in part for this reason, we choose difficult activity for its own sake. This is good, one might think, because choosing and pursuing something that is good *is itself good*.

There is a tradition of acknowledging a value-theoretic principle that captures this idea. It has been called the principle of Recursion by some, or the *amare bonum bonus* by others, and has been acknowledged in one form or another by Aristotle, Moore, Nozick, and others.¹⁷ The idea, in a nutshell, is that, *it is good to love the good*. Given some good object, having a positive attitude toward that object

¹⁵ Admittedly there is no guarantee of subjective feelings of purpose and fulfillment, but the idea is that self-propagating projects are a good source.

¹⁶ [Descartes has a nice passage likening the truth to a mountain that you can touch with your fingertips but not wrap your arms around. Imagine that I found it and artfully quoted it here.]

¹⁷ Cf., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175b25-30, 1174b20-25, (Moore 1971 [1903] pp. 177-178, 204ff), (Nozick 1981, pp. 429ff).

is *itself* good.¹⁸ Positive attitudes here are understood as broadly as possible, and include *loving, taking pleasure in, wishing for, and pursuing*, and so forth. The *amare bonum bonus* (ABB) also encompasses the corresponding claims that it is good to hate the bad; bad to hate the good; and bad to love the bad. Likewise hating is understood broadly as including *avoiding, being pained by, and destroying*, and so on. Hurka (2001) nicely crystallizes the principle this way:

- (1) Given some base good, G, loving G is of positive value; hating G is of negative value;
- (2) Given some base evil, B, hating B is of positive intrinsic value; loving B is of negative value.

Relevant for the discussion here is the first half of the ABB – it is good to love the good. So, for the ABB to be activated, there must be some intrinsically good base, which is the object of some pro-attitude. In projects with self-propagating goals, the base good is challenging activity, granting that engaging in challenging activity, other things equal, is intrinsically good. In projects with self-propagating goals, we take up a goal that gives us *continued* challenging activity – in other words, we are pursuing a goal that gives us more challenge as we progress. Because our pursuit is directed toward a good – namely challenge – our activity of pursuit is *itself* intrinsically good. Consequently we have an additional source of value in projects with self-propagating goals, according to the ABB.

Of course, there are other aspects to our goals, but this is compatible with the ABB. As long as we are engaged in active pursuit of an intrinsic good, this is enough that our pursuit *itself* is intrinsically good.

Further, assuming that the self-propagating structure is typical of goals that are of independent value such as the pursuit of knowledge, or creative artistic activity as we discussed above, then the ABB is activated in this respect as well. Given that knowledge, for example, is intrinsically valuable, the ABB entails that the pursuit of knowledge is also intrinsically valuable. The same could be said for creative artistic activity, or any other independently valuable goal. So for any self-propagating goal that is also valuable independently, its pursuit is additionally intrinsically valuable according to the ABB.

For such projects, as a result, the pursuit is especially valuable according to the ABB. Plausibly, the value accrued by the ABB is proportionate to the value of the object. That is, the more valuable the object, the more valuable its pursuit. So a project that has a self-propagating structure *and* is valuable independently is particularly valuable, and accordingly so is its pursuit.

But one might wonder whether we get some peculiar results considering the structure on its own when it is not part of a project that has significant independent value. One might reasonably point out that it looks as if, for example, playing an infinitely long game of catch might be an example of one of these perpetually difficult and ever-expanding goal activities. Surely playing catch would not be a superlatively meaningful activity.

Now, this doesn't exactly follow. In order for the ABB to be activated, the activity must be sufficiently challenging – the idea is that difficulty or *challenge* is

¹⁸ This is not to be confused with the notion of a “fitting attitude” according to fitting attitudes analyses of value, where attitudes toward certain objects are “fitting” or appropriate in a certain significant way. According to the ABB, attitudes are actually *valuable*. The base object has prior value, and it grounds the value of the attitude toward it.

valuable and so pursuing it is also valuable. Catch isn't especially challenging. But we *could* make catch increasingly interesting – several balls at once, greater distance, and strategic bounces. Would a game of Advanced Catch be exceptionally valuable? Surely we would not think that someone who chose to dedicate their life to playing Advanced Catch would have a superlatively meaningful life.

I'm inclined to agree, largely because there are many *more* valuable projects to be pursued. The significance accrued by the ABB is, it is reasonable to think, proportionate to the value of the base. The challenge of Advanced Catch may be sufficient to be of some value, but presumably other more challenging activities would be more valuable, not only in virtue of their higher degree of challenge, but also because they may be richer sources of value. But this of course to a certain extent concedes that a game of Advanced Catch, or for that matter any other activity characterized by the self-propagating structure and a certain sufficient degree of difficulty could be the sort of project that contributes to a meaningful life. This is something I'm willing to embrace, and the reasons why will emerge soon. In any case, Advanced Catch is not *superlatively* valuable in contrast to other projects, specifically projects that are at least as challenging and also have independent value, such as artistic achievement or scientific inquiry. Having the self-propagating formal structure is *a* source for especially meaningful achievements, but it's not the only source.

So independently valuable projects with ever-expanding structures are excellent sources of meaning. This is not a surprising conclusion, but we now have a better understanding of *why* it is achievements of certain kinds that are good candidates for being among the things that make for a meaningful life. In fact, Levy, who suggested the idea with which I began – namely, the idea that achievements with self-propagating structures are the most meaningful – holds the view that achievements such as intellectual pursuits are the sorts of things that are superlatively meaningful, in contrast to “downshifting” to a simple life dedicated to raising a family, or moving to the country and farming. A simple life is not superlatively meaningful because it does not have a self-propagating goal.

But now that we have a more detailed account of why the self-propagating goals are a source of superlative meaning, we can see that Levy's claim about so-called downshifting is not right. In the paper where Levy originally sketches out this idea, he claims that “downshifting” to what one might call a simpler life – raising a family or farming – while meaningful, is not “superlatively” meaningful in the way that, say, philosophy is (Levy 2005, p. 185). The latter is characterized by the self-propagating structure, while the others are not, in Levy's view.¹⁹

Now we can see that this is not true. Because the ever-expanding structure is in part a feature of projects because of the way that we set our goals, it turns out that a wider range of domains than one might think can be sources of superlative meaning.

¹⁹ Levy also says that exceptionally meaningful projects have “supremely valuable goods at stake” which further precludes practices such as farming from being superlatively meaningful. Levy also appears to include parenting among such non-superlatively valuable practices (p. 181, 189). It seems reasonable that supremely valuable goods are at stake in parenting, so even by Levy's own lights it is eligible for a superlatively meaningful project, although it is clearly categorized among his “downshifted” pursuits that are not eligible for such meaning.

When taken up in the right sort of way, many so-called downshifting pursuits *do* have a self-propagating structure that can be superlatively meaningful. Parenting or being a part of a family can have a self-propagating goal. In fact, it seems even more obviously self-propagating than physics. There is no obvious end point, and no maximally good or successful way of loving, caring for, connecting with, and relating to those who are dear to you. There are always new ways to improve your caring endeavors with those whom you love, and always new things to explore and new challenges to meet with your family and loved ones. So it isn't just typical highfaluting, intellectually lofty "valuable projects" such as pursuing the philosophical life or being committed to improving social justice that are superlatively meaningful, but it's quite a lot more expansive than this – successful relationships with friends and family can also be superlatively meaningful in the same way that these other pursuits can.

The same can be said about other seemingly less grand projects. Farming is a prime example of a downshifted lifestyle in Levy's view, but taken in the right way, the goals of farming are self-propagating in a similar way to any creative endeavor. Just as there is no maximally ideal method for doing philosophy, there is no maximally ideal way to cultivate crops or livestock. Methods improve, innovations develop new technology, and new goals open up. Not too long ago, one might have thought the goal of farming was obvious: raise as much crops or livestock as efficiently as possible. But now many farmers have much different goals – growing crops that are free of dangerous pesticides, cultivating land with minimal impact on the larger environment, or treating animals with a certain amount of compassion. There is no final goal to farming and the ideals, methods, and aims shift and develop. This isn't just my city girl armchair view of farming: according to the Agricultural Sustainability Institute at UC Davis, the goals of farming are certainly not just to feed more hogs to buy more land. Rather, "[s]ustainable agriculture integrates three main goals—environmental health, economic profitability, and social and economic equity."²⁰ Of course there are many different ways to farm, and this may not be the best or only way, but the important point is that the goals of farming are not obvious, and can be pursued as self-propagating. No doubt this is only one way of characterizing the goals of this organization, and if we were to ask other farmers we may find other goals, and, even more relevantly, if we asked the same farmers in the future, I would imagine that their methods and aims had developed and progressed even more. So even farming can be exceptionally meaningful because of a self-propagating structure.

The view that I have described here captures more than what one might think would typically be included on a philosopher's account of what amounts to worthwhile projects that contribute to exceptional meaning in life.

Indeed, the most meaningless and Sisyphean tasks of adult life can be exceptionally meaningful when pursued as a self-propagating goal. "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework," as de Beauvoir observed, and yet taken on in a certain way, homemaking can become a self-propagating meaningful project. The Ancient Greeks understood the seriousness and complexity that "household management" can involve – and *oikonomikos* is homemaking writ large. Of course, it's hard to imagine this being the case if you live by yourself in a small, sparse apartment, but if we imagine "household management" to also include

²⁰ <<http://asi.ucdavis.edu/sarep/about-sarep/def>>

raising a large family, it can become an increasingly complex undertaking. There are many bills and a budget to balance, a house to maintain, all involving many goals – coordinating schedules, preparing meals, planning projects together, keeping everything functioning. There are always new projects to undertake and new methods to explore (Martha Stewart, living proof). It's hard to pin down exactly what the central goal might be (“keep the family happy and healthy,” perhaps), and one can easily imagine, like the Agricultural Sustainability Institute, the goals can evolve and develop, as new possibilities open up.

Now one might think that this is a sort of counterexample to the proposed account of superlatively valuable achievements. Surely if anything, homemaking is *not* exceptionally meaningful, especially in contrast to, say, pursuing the latest breakthroughs in theoretical physics and so forth. Granted, in contrast it may be less meaningful than a project with a goal that has independent value, such as theoretical physics, and not all goals in homemaking are self-propagating. But the point is that there is the possibility of an exceptionally meaningful project in homemaking, contrary to what one might think.

The same can be said for trivial pursuits that one might choose to take on as self-propagating goals, such as beer brewing, artisan pottery, nail art, or bodybuilding. Although there may be some questionable elements involved in the pursuit of some of these goals, and all things considered some pursuits may be less meaningful than others, I disagree that we should draw the conclusion that such pursuits are impossible candidates for superlative meaning in life, since, pursued in a certain way, they may have self-propagating goals which lend them significant meaning.²¹

There are two reasons in particular why I think the meaningfulness of a wide range of projects should be acknowledged. First, some endeavours that may be seen traditionally as uncultured or menial have rich, independently valuable features and the potential for self-propagating goals. Homemaking, for example, may include not simply household management, but also raising a family or fostering loving relationships. Surely if anything has independent value it would be this.

Even in other cases of seemingly trivial pastimes with less obvious independent value, there is a rich world of exploration to be had – to an outsider something may seem simple or trivial, but to an expert, it is a rich and complex world full of challenge and opportunities for excellence. In some pursuits, to be sure, this may max out relatively quickly, but one of the wonderful things about human beings is that we can develop ingenuity in just about any domain, and exploit the seemingly simple by uncovering almost unimaginable depths. To be sure, there is more meaning in some projects than in others. Theoretical physics or poetry might have significant independent value making their pursuit even more valuable than, say, pottery or bodybuilding. But the point is that a far wider range of activities are eligible for superlative meaning than one might have thought.

A second consideration to motivate an all-embracing conclusion with respect to exceptionally meaningful projects concerns the control – lack of, rather – over what we care about. There is only so much control that we have over what sparks our interest – not every activity that would be an appropriate source for fulfillment

²¹ It is another question as to whether *any* sort of pursuit would be a candidate for significant meaning if it had this structure. Could the pursuit of an evil goal, for example, be meaningful in this way? This is something I should like to address in a longer version.

actually *does* inspire feelings of fulfillment.²² Tolstoy case in point – his literary career was astounding and might for anyone constitute a source of meaning and fulfillment, but at the time when he wrote *A Confession*, he reveals that it gave him no such feelings at all. His life, one might think, had objective meaning but did not have the subjective component of feelings fulfillment that we might think is so crucial for meaningfulness. Because of the diversity of things that spark these feelings and the relatively low degree of control that we have over them, we can conclude that it is a virtue of the proposed view that such a wide range of activities can be appropriate sources for feelings of fulfillment. Of course this point is only compelling if you think that we should be as all-embracing as possible in an account of exceptionally meaningful projects. According to the picture I've sketched here, there is a wide array of activities that can become exceptionally meaningful, and as a result lives that pursue them gain meaning, and the feelings of fulfillment that result are appropriate and significant. This, I think, is a virtue. If philosophy or theoretical physics doesn't grab you, an exceptionally meaningful life is still possible, be it in pursuit of excellence creating rustic artisanal pottery, interior decorating, or racing sports cars.

Some might see this conclusion as a sort of objection – if nail art is the only thing that floats your boat, surely pursuit of such a project is not a superlatively meaningful life. Superlative meaning should be reserved for only the highest endeavours, such as philosophy or theoretical physics.

To be sure, if a pursuit maxes out its meaning early on, then that's all you get. But even then, the richness of a project in any domain is at least in part a matter of how its goals are shaped and set by those who pursue it. Wouldn't it be more intellectually generous to admit that I don't know just how deep and rich the exploration of certain domains – such as artisanal pottery, or bodybuilding – can be? Moreover, it is appealing to have an account that lets lots of people have very meaningful lives, rather than fewer. The world is a more interesting place with more meaningful lives and more diverse pursuits in it.

Let me return to the overall notion that self-propagating goals are superlatively meaningful and consider some concerns.

First, concerning progress. The distinction between the goals of household management or philosophy, say, being either Sisyphean or self-propagating hinges on the possibility of progress. But one might think that progress in self-propagating goals is illusory. The goals may change, but one may question whether there really progress, and rather see a sort of treadmill of the same sort of thing over again, albeit with different methods, or different variations on the goal in mind, none of which constitute progress. There might be different ways of doing philosophy, or different aims in farming, but there is no real sense in which these methods or aims are *better* or constitute progress.

This is a real and puzzling concern and something that I don't think I can resolve fully at the moment. One reason why is because the answer will depend on the details of any particular activity, and in some cases, the answer is contentious and complicated (for instance, is there any progress in philosophy?). Moreover, if progress is possible in philosophy, or if it is possible to pursue an aim such as

²² This point of course has its roots in Frankfurt's observation about the nature and significance of what we care about. We only have so much control over what sparks our care (Frankfurt 1982).

farming in a way that constitutes a self-propagating structure with progress, whether or not any particular *philosopher* or *farmer* is doing this will depend on the goals as they set them. Whether or not one pursues philosophical goals in a way that is self-propagating is up to you in what you do and how you think about it. You can plod around and try just to come up with some decent arguments for a plausible view and set the goal for completion relatively low, or you can have a self-propagating goal that involves improvement and development. So whether or not one's project has a self-propagating goal is in part a function of how one sets one's goals. But of course this leaves the question open as to whether *anyone* can pursue philosophy or farming with a self-propagating goal that involves progress. It seems to me that at least in one sense that one can – namely, in the sense that we can improve and refine our methods. Consider a virtuoso violinist at the height of her career. One might think her goals are simply to maintain her performance abilities. But we can quite easily imagine her with self-propagating goals, constantly refining her technique and interpretation of pieces, streamlining her practice regimen, cultivating new musical relationships. Something similar can at least be said for something like philosophy, where, even if your theories are ultimately barking up the wrong tree, at the very least a philosopher can indeed have self-propagating goals of improving argumentative prowess, refining the space of views, and developing new sources for creative insights.

One might think that this amounts to a weakness of the view. We are relinquishing the “objective worthwhileness” of meaningful projects by making too much rely on the way a goal is set and how it is pursued. One might think that this gives the view a kind of subjectivity which one might find objectionable. The appeal, after all, of including “projects of objective worth” as part of an account of meaning in life is that there is something about the projects that is *objectively* worthwhile – that is to say, set independently from how we understand them.

But this contrast is mistaken because the worthwhileness of projects with self-propagating goals is indeed objective. The self-propagating structure from which significant meaning can be found is a matter of the structure itself. The structure imparts meaning objectively, that is, independently from any particular attitudes toward it. Attitudes partly compose the structure, but the structure itself is significant, independently from our attitudes toward it and so is in this respect objective. This remains true even if we are not making progress in all the ways we might think we are.

There is another respect in which goals are subjective which I take to be part of the appeal of the view. Because goals are shaped by those who pursue them, whether or not and to what extent a project is meaningful is a matter of how its goals are taken up. This not only allows for an appealing plurality of meaningful projects, but it also incorporates the significance of personal investment in meaning. Our personal investment in our projects matters for meaning, and how projects that matter *to us* make our lives meaningful, and not just projects that matter. Achievements therefore incorporate both objective and subjective components in an appealing way. This point highlights one of the reasons why achievement is suited particularly well to be an element of a meaningful life – it includes both objective and subjective elements, and as a result a meaningful life is both a matter of personal investment and significance, but also subject to an objective reckoning. Not just anything goes, but, on the other hand, just about anything can go, when taken up in the relevant way.

There is far more to be said, of course, but let me close with a summary. In this paper I explored an account of the characteristics of the most meaningful achievements, and discussed that there is a far wider array of meaningful achievements than we might have originally thought. Whether or not this paper constitutes one of them, I can't be entirely sure, but I am certain that the many questions left unexplored tell of a self-propagating goal, more than I could possibly accomplish here today.

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