

# Meaning in Life and Becoming More Fulfilled

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Forthcoming in *The Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*. Please cite published version.

## Abstract

Subjectivism about meaning in life remains a viable option, despite its relative unpopularity. Two arguments against it in the literature, the first by Susan Wolf and the second by Aaron Smuts and Antti Kauppinen, fail. *Pace* Wolf, lives devoted to activities of no objective value need not be pointless, unproductive, and futile, and so not prima facie meaningless; and, *pace* Smuts and Kauppinen, subjectivism is compatible with people being mistaken about how meaningful their own lives are. This paper elaborates a novel subjectivist view according to which becoming more fulfilled makes a life meaningful for a person. Becoming more fulfilled is a process that has being more fulfilled as its endpoint, and, as with any process, it can come to a halt before it is complete. More substantively, becoming more fulfilled by some  $x$  is a matter of aiming to do various activities well, where doing them well at least partly constitutes benefiting  $x$ , and requires that one be more fulfilled by  $x$  than one presently is. Finally, this paper shows why the becoming more fulfilled view is to be preferred to the standard subjectivist theory, the fulfillment view, and how it produces intuitive results.

Insofar as meaning as applied to lives is a value, a common question is whether meaning is ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’. When this question has to do with what makes a life meaningful<sup>1</sup>, answering it is a matter of finding out whether only things with objective value can do so. In this context, to say that only things with objective value can make a life meaningful is in part to say that meaning has a necessary objective value condition. A theory that denies this will have to say that things can make a person’s life meaningful for her independently of their connection to anything of objective value. Now, presumably, such meaning-makers will do so, at least in part, via their connection to contingent features of a person herself. So any theory that denies that meaning has a necessary objective value condition will be subjectivist where the rubber meets

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to a concern with what the concept or property of meaning consists in. For accounts at those levels of analysis, see Brogaard and Smith (2005), Kauppinen (2012), Martela (2017), and Metz (2001, 2012, 2013a, 2013b: chapter 2).

the road.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, I call a theory *objectivist* just in case it says that meaning has a necessary objective value condition, and I call a theory *subjectivist* just in case it denies this.<sup>3</sup>

To repeat: this condition has to do with whether *only* things of objective value can make a person's life meaningful for her.<sup>4</sup> So it is logically possible to be a subjectivist about meaning in life by claiming that *some* things without objective value can make a person's life meaningful for her, while allowing that, or being agnostic about whether, objectively valuable things can *also* do so. In other words, one can be a subjectivist just by identifying some contingent features of persons that, independently of those features' connection to anything of objective value, make those persons' lives meaningful for them. In doing so, one identifies a genuinely subjective source of meaning. Because subjectivism about meaning remains rather unpopular among contemporary theorists and viewed by them as straightforwardly refuted, a defensible and compelling subjectivism of even this modest sort should be of interest.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'at least in part' qualification is important: a subjectivist theory can appeal to objective conditions, provided they are not objective *value* conditions. Thanks to Barry Maguire for helping me frame this.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of subjectivist views include Calhoun (2018: chapter 2), and Taylor (2000). Darwall (1983: chapters 11–12) and Wong (2008) can also be seen as subjectivists, though their theories are distinctly *intersubjectivist*. Non-subjectivist views include Evers and van Smeden (2016), Kauppinen (2012), Kekes (2000), Levy (2005), Metz (2013b: chapter 12), Smuts (2013, 2017), Wielenberg (2005), and Wolf (2010, 2015). Bramble (2015) is commonly called an objectivist because he rejects 'The Passion Requirement' (his language) on meaning in life; on my way of carving up things, however, this is a mistake, since Bramble *also* rejects the necessary objective value condition (what he calls 'The Objectivity Requirement'). For him, rather, subjective goodness and objective value figure in *sufficient* conditions for meaning in life.

<sup>4</sup> I will insist on using 'for her'-type qualifiers throughout this paper. See section 4 for my reasons. As I use them, these qualifiers do not fix the referent to how meaningful each person *thinks* or *feels* his or her life is. The latter interpretation is not by any means obligatory. Consider the following. In her critical commentary of Wolf (2010), Nomy Arpaly says that "being in charge of a beloved goldfish or two can give [a severely mentally disabled] child a measure of fulfillment that would require much bigger projects in a normal adult—but for the same reasons and via the same mechanisms. Thus, in the case of the child it is not strange to say that goldfish keeping gives his life meaning" (2010: 89). When considering such a case, it is felicitous to say that a life of goldfish caretaking is *meaningful for* this child. One can do this even while denying that one is making a claim about how meaningful that child thinks or feels her own life is. In fact it is plausible that she lacks the reflective and affective capacities to have such an attitude toward her own life at all. The reader is free, of course, to disagree with the assessment itself. My argument is not an argument for the *truth* of the assessment, but about *what* the content of the assessment is.

In this paper, I argue that a relatively sophisticated but modest subjectivist theory, *the becoming more fulfilled view*, is both defensible and compelling.<sup>5</sup> The view is that a person's becoming more fulfilled makes her life meaningful for her. Becoming more fulfilled is a process that has being more fulfilled as its hypothetical endpoint. More specifically:

*The Becoming More Fulfilled View.* A person *S*'s becoming more fulfilled by *x* makes her life meaningful for her when, and only when, *S* aims to do activities  $\Phi = \{\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots\}$  well, where  $\Phi$ ing well

- a) at least partly constitutes benefiting *x*, and either
- b) requires caring more deeply and richly about *x* than *S* has so far, or
- c) requires doing more of  $\{\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots\}$  than *S* has so far.

Section 1 lays the groundwork for this view with a discussion of fulfillment and the temporal dynamics of caring, which partly constitutes fulfillment. Section 2 motivates the becoming more fulfilled view and spells it out more, though I leave the discussion of how to extend the view to account for *degrees* of meaning for section 4, allowing the discussion of cases there to raise the issue organically.

Section 3 responds to a pair of arguments against subjectivism, the first due to Susan Wolf (2010), and the second due to Antti Kauppinen (2012) and Aaron Smuts (2013). Discussing a well-known variant of Sisyphus who has every subjective quality that could plausibly matter for meaning, Wolf claims that the fact that his activities are pointless, unproductive, and futile is evidence that his life is meaningless. If she is right, she has identified a counterexample to every plausible subjectivism. Her claim is false, however, because Sisyphus' activities are not pointless, unproductive, and futile. Smuts and Kauppinen argue that subjectivism implies, falsely, that no person can be mistaken about how meaningful her own life is. However, subjectivism as such does not imply that. I explain why and then illustrate this with the becoming more fulfilled view.

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<sup>5</sup> Bramble's (2015) view is rather closer to mine in its modest spirit. See footnote 3. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to take this tack.

Taking a step back, the major motivation behind rejecting subjectivism is the thought that it will always produce counterintuitive results: that every variant of subjectivism will count as meaningful a wide range of intuitively meaningless lives. Section 4 addresses this charge head-on and argues that it is not so, at least when it comes to the becoming more fulfilled view. Once we spell out the lives in question in further detail, and we are explicit about exactly in what way we are assessing them, we see that the view produces broadly intuitive results.

### 1. Being Fulfilled and the Dynamics of Caring

For subjectivism about meaning, a natural place to begin is with the view that a person's being fulfilled makes her life meaningful for her.<sup>6</sup> In this section, I'll elaborate this view; in the next, I will motivate going beyond it and spell out my preferred view.

Before I begin, let me head off a misunderstanding: *feeling* fulfilled is not the same thing as *being* fulfilled. The relationship between these states is analogous to that between, say, feeling afraid and being in danger. Though the relationship between these two states is a matter of philosophical debate, it is a clear mistake to identify them one with another. Feeling fulfilled will henceforth play no role in the plausible subjectivist views I consider, so we can set it aside.

I assume that a person's being fulfilled by some  $x$  (whether a person, thing, or activity) is a matter of caring about  $x$  and doing what caring disposes her to do. I take this assumption to be plausible and to generally comport with our intuitions. I also endorse a common view about a person's caring about  $x$ : She exhibits various familiar emotional, cognitive, motivational, attentional, and physiological dispositions focused on  $x$ , where these dispositions together

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<sup>6</sup> Though they use the language of valuing rather than caring, Calhoun (2018: chapter 2) and Wong (2008) can be seen as offering views like this.

constitute  $x$ 's mattering to her.<sup>7</sup> So, for example, a person's caring about her friend involves dispositions to feel anxiety over his upcoming travails; to believe that his needing her help is a reason for her to do so, and to be motivated accordingly; to notice when he is uncomfortable; to be excited to see him after a long separation; and many more besides. These dispositions constitute this man's mattering to her. Because caring is a complex *dispositional* state, however, being fulfilled by  $x$  is more *active* than merely caring about  $x$ : being fulfilled by  $x$  involves actually doing what caring about  $x$  disposes one to do. To emphasize this, I will sometimes speak of fulfillment as *caring engagement*.

Being fulfilled by some  $x$  comes in degrees, which is a function of its components that themselves come in degrees. It should already be clear what it is for a person to do more of what her caring disposes her to do. However, the degree to which a person cares about some  $x$  requires a little explication. I take this to be a matter of the *depth* and *richness* of her caring about  $x$ . To put it briefly, depth is a matter of the *intensity* of the responses a person is disposed to manifest in caring about  $x$ —the intensity of emotions, strength of motivational pull, weight of perceived normative reasons, and variety and extremity of multi-modal (visual, aural, etc.) focus involved. By contrast, richness is a matter of the *variety* of the disposed responses. Broadly speaking, deeper and richer caring typically happens as the person's conception of  $x$  is developed via her continued engagement with it. So, for example, as a person comes to see that her acquaintance gets very anxious in formal social settings, she can become disposed to attend even more intently to his body language than she was before (thus deeper caring), or she can become newly disposed to whisk him away to a quiet corner at parties (thus richer caring), etc.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Helm (2010), Jaworska (2007), Kolodny (2011: section 8), Maguire (2017), and Seidman (2009). Scheffler (2011) and Kolodny (2003) build highly similar accounts of valuing. For an in-depth look at *focus* as involved in caring, see Helm (2010) especially.

These processes of enrichment and deepening can take place such that a person comes to care about  $x$  when she antecedently did not. This is because caring requires a certain amount of richness and depth in a person's dispositions focused on  $x$  for her to count as caring about  $x$  at all: she has to be disposed vis-à-vis  $x$  to feel, think, attend, and act in at least somewhat intense and various ways. So it is possible to exhibit some such dispositions focused on  $x$ , which are themselves part and parcel of caring about  $x$ , without caring about  $x$ . This will matter shortly.

Returning to the main thread, the basic idea might be that the degree to which a person is fulfilled by various persons, things, and activities in her life is a function of the extent to which she is caringly engaged with them. The latter is, in turn, a matter of how deeply and richly she cares about them, and to what extent she engages with them in what she does.

I will say that a person can be *more* fulfilled by  $x$  in situation  $S_1$  than by  $y$  in  $S_2$  to the extent that, either

- a) given some activity  $\phi$  she does in  $S_1$  and some activity  $\psi$  she does in  $S_2$ , she cares about  $x$  more deeply or richly in  $S_1$  than she cares about  $y$  in  $S_2$ , where her caring about  $x$  disposes her to  $\phi$  and her caring about  $y$  disposes her to  $\psi$ ;  
or,
- b) given that she cares equally richly and deeply about  $x$  in  $S_1$  as about  $y$  in  $S_2$ , she does more activities  $\{\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots\}$  in  $S_1$  than  $\{\psi_1, \psi_2, \dots\}$  in  $S_2$ , where her caring about  $x$  disposes her to  $\{\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots\}$  and her caring about  $y$  disposes her to  $\{\psi_1, \psi_2, \dots\}$ .

In reality, of course, some mixture of the two is often the case.

Accordingly, the view that a person's being fulfilled makes her life meaningful for her can be extended: a person's life is *more* meaningful for her in  $S_1$  than in  $S_2$  because, and to the extent that, she is more fulfilled by the things, persons, and activities in her life in  $S_1$  than in  $S_2$ . I'll call this extended view *the being (more) fulfilled view* of meaningfulness.

Now, caring engagement often deepens and enriches our caring. As we act for the sake of what we care about, we learn more about how to care about it. We come to see more clearly what

its weal and woe consists in and the sorts of situations that affect either, and accordingly become disposed to response to such situations in the emotional, motivational, cognitive, and attentional ways that constitute richer and deeper caring about it. For example, at one time I cared about doing philosophy for its own sake, but possessed a rather sophomoric view of what doing philosophy was. And yet by doing it I came to see, among other things, that doing it *well* involves sustained and careful engagement with one's interlocutors. Prior to this discovery, I was not worried about, say, failing to read an important text on the topic I had chosen to write on; I do worry about that now. So the ways in which I am disposed to think and feel, in caring about doing philosophy, have changed—my caring has grown deeper and richer.

The weal and woe of what we care about, it needs to be emphasized, is not obviously a matter of objective value. A person's weal and woe has to do with contingent features of herself, such as what she likes and what she needs to survive. So to see more clearly what the weal and woe of a person consists in is to see what is good *for her*, which does not obviously concern what is objectively good about her or anything else that is objectively good. And the weal and woe of various practices (as distinguished from their *products*), such as making art or doing philosophy, has to do with what it is to make art or do philosophy *well*, which is determined by what these practices are (cf. Thomson 2008). So to see more clearly what the weal and woe of such practices consists in is to see what is good as an instance of this practice, which does not obviously concern what is objectively good about it as such or about anything else. So the attunement at hand need not, for all we know, be attunement to objective values; objective value, therefore, need play no explanatory role in these dynamics. Or, at a minimum, the objectivist owes us an argument to that effect.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> cf. the claims made by Metz (2013b: 175–176). My thanks to Nadeem Hussain for prompting me to address this issue.

However, just as finer attunement can deepen and enrich a person's caring about something, such attunement can also lead to detachment when her caring depended on misconceptions from which she gets disabused. Suppose, for example, that a woman named Sophie has taken up philosophy in a serious way after exciting exposure to it in undergraduate, when she read the provocative and insightful work of writers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. She finds reading and writing philosophy engrossing, and capable of producing pleasure and frustrating confusion in equal measure. She gets a thrill from every new project she takes up, believing that, as she perseveres, satisfaction or failure lurk just beyond sight. As she progresses with her plans, writing a senior thesis, attending summer schools, graduate school, and so forth, however, her understanding of philosophy as a practice slowly changes. She comes to see, for example, that engaging with her heroes in a respectable way requires extensive archival research and grappling with the turgid prose of Kant and Hegel; that the fruits of such labor will be arguments that, however compelling she finds them at the time, will not be so compelling that none of her opponents can reasonably resist their conclusions; and that she herself will, in time, find many of those arguments of hers deeply flawed. As she understands philosophy better in this way, her attachment to it gradually slips loose until the prospect of spending her time and energy on this leaves her cold. She no longer cares about doing philosophy—she struggles to go to the archives, or to write papers, or even to discuss it with friends over beer; she stops worrying about getting papers published, or hoping she will polish off a new theory of this or that; her attention strays when in seminar or when, on rare occasions, she does sit down with a text; and so on. She is ipso facto no longer fulfilled by doing philosophy.

Though unfortunate, such moments should be familiar enough. In acting for the sake of someone we care about, we sometimes come to see more clearly who they are in such a way that new divisions arise between us. Sometimes by doing philosophy, or practicing law, or being

famous, or getting married, we come to see that these things prove to be other than we thought—perhaps grinding or tedious, or with benefits that lie in places that fail to draw our appreciative gaze. The point here is not that our positive *feelings* of fulfillment, satisfaction, and so on often, even tend to, return to a baseline that disappoints us—the so-called hedonic treadmill. The point, rather, is that to be fulfilled by something or someone is to hazard a great personal risk, for, in doing so, a person makes herself vulnerable to loss—not just because what matters to her might be lost, but because its mattering to her might be.

## 2. Becoming More Fulfilled

The being (more) fulfilled view gets some initial grip. It inherits the virtues of subjectivist theories about meaning in life, while eschewing an implausible overemphasis on occurrent *feelings* of fulfillment. Even so, there is some reason to look for an alternative.

Let us continue with Sophie, and suppose that, though she is no longer fulfilled by doing philosophy, she resolves to persist for a while. This she does largely due to her history with it, including not only her past fulfillment by it, but also how her caring about it was subject to learning more about it. We can imagine, in particular, that she thinks that to abandon philosophy now would be a disservice to herself in light of what had mattered so much to her for so long; and this would be a disservice because, as she has experienced, learning more about philosophy has the potential to alter what matters to her—and so, perhaps, the potential to make it matter to her anew.

By persisting in this way, Sophie does so without being fulfilled by doing philosophy. However, her life is more meaningful for her by persisting than it would be if she abandoned doing philosophy entirely (all else equal). We have, then, a case in which her life is *more*

*meaningful* for her by persisting in philosophy than it would be by abandoning philosophy, even while she is *not more fulfilled* by persisting in philosophy than by abandoning it.

This greater meaningfulness plausibly has, at least in part, a subjective source (outside of, especially, whatever objective value doing philosophy might have). One key factor, recall, is that doing philosophy had mattered to her so much for so long, and this is the context in which she made the resolution she did. Had she made no such resolution, but had rather carried on in a kind of unreflective drift, hemmed in by habit and her prior plans, the meaningfulness for her of continuing to do philosophy would be attenuated. On the other hand, if she had resolved to do so but not against the backdrop of philosophy mattering to her so much and for so long, her persistence would look rather quixotic or arbitrary, which would also attenuate the meaningfulness of doing so.

Cases like Sophie's give us some reason to look for an alternative to the being (more) fulfilled view while remaining within a subjectivist framework. Still, it is true that, by persisting in philosophy, Sophie endeavors in a way that, if "successful" in some sense, will result in her being more fulfilled by doing philosophy than she is at present. And this suggests the following defense of the being (more) fulfilled view: Sophie's life is not more meaningful for her by persisting in philosophy, not directly anyway; rather, by persisting, she does something that bears an instrumental relationship to meaningfulness: persisting is a way of bringing about her own fulfillment in the future.

However, we should not accept this as the whole story. For one thing, the intuition at hand, that Sophie's life is more meaningful by persisting in philosophy, is preserved even if her endeavors fail to bring about future fulfillment. We could imagine, for example, that before Sophie comes to care again about doing philosophy, she is tragically struck dead by a truck. This

would not render her perseverance meaningless for her—it still made her life more meaningful for her than it would have been had she abandoned philosophy entirely.

For another, if it were right that Sophie's endeavors were only instrumentally valuable as far as meaningfulness goes, then the following prescription would be apt: as far as meaningfulness is concerned, she should do whatever is most likely to bring about the most fulfillment—persist in philosophy, run off to Hollywood to become a star, marry that boy who proposed to her on their third date, etc. But this is a strange prescription. It misses the significance of the fact that Sophie's endeavors here are meaningful at least in part because they enact the resolution she has made against the backdrop of what had mattered to her so much and for so long. Now, it might be said that the significance of this fact is that it makes the particular path she has chosen more likely to result in fulfillment as compared to say, running off to Hollywood. But this response helps itself to more than the case allows. What is distinctive of the case at hand is precisely that Sophie's caring about doing philosophy turned out to be predicated on a serious misapprehension of what doing philosophy involves. So the fact that philosophy used to matter to her does not make it more likely that philosophy (compared to, say, running off to Hollywood) will come to matter to her again as she learns more about it.<sup>9</sup>

The being (more) fulfilled view treats fulfillment as a state that makes a person's life meaningful, and assesses the value of endeavors like Sophie's in terms of their instrumental relations to that state. But this explanation seems to falter for the two reasons I've just given. So let this be some motivation to look beyond the being (more) fulfilled view.

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<sup>9</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to expand my response here.

## 2.1. Being versus Becoming More Fulfilled

Let me reiterate that, common across the cases I have been emphasizing, people living meaningful lives can be seen as endeavoring in such a way that, should they succeed, they will end up more fulfilled than they presently are. And this is due in part to the fact that success involves deeper and richer caring about what they are doing. Thus, being more fulfilled can indeed be seen as a *hypothetical endpoint* by which subjectivist theorists about meaning understand the endeavors of people living meaningful lives. But it is not, for all that, what *makes* their lives meaningful for them, where their endeavors are merely instrumental thereto.

This is to grant that a person is *becoming* more fulfilled by some *x* only when her endeavors have as their hypothetical endpoint that she is more fulfilled by *x*: She is undergoing a particular kind of process, one that has greater fulfillment as its endpoint. However, I suggest that it is not the endpoint, but the process itself, that makes her life meaningful for her. This, as I elaborate in what follows, is *the becoming more fulfilled view* of meaning in life.

The language of ‘becoming’ emphasizes the processual nature of this subjective source of meaning, distinct from but intimately related to the state-like nature of being more fulfilled. The relationship between being and becoming more fulfilled is analogous to that between *having* more cocktails ready for a party and *making* more of them: the former is a state, the latter is a process that has the former as its endpoint.<sup>10</sup> And, just as it is possible for a person to be making more cocktails for a party over some finite span of time without having (made) more such cocktails at the end of that span or at any later time (perhaps because she realizes halfway through that she is out of bitters), it is possible for a person to be becoming more fulfilled over some finite span of time without being more fulfilled at the end of that span or at any later time.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, in this pair, having more cocktails ready is usually the *non*-hypothetical endpoint in the sense that, while making more cocktails, having them ready is indeed what the person is intentionally trying to achieve. For further discussion of processes in the context of action theory, see, among others, Paul (2014), Stout (2018), Thompson (2008, 2011), and Wolfson (2012).

She surely needs to be taking the steps in a sequence of requisite steps such that, should she complete them, she will end up more fulfilled. But this is compatible with not being more fulfilled because she might never take every requisite step, whether of her own doing or the world's. As with any process, becoming more fulfilled can come to a halt before it is complete.

There is a thin sense in which *any* process that has greater fulfillment as its hypothetical endpoint is a process of becoming more fulfilled. However, not just any such process makes a person's life meaningful for her via a subjective source. Imagine, for example, that a benevolent mad scientist labors over Sophie's brain every night while she sleeps, for a very long time, so she ends up caring a great deal about doing philosophy. And imagine, moreover, that he does this precisely because Sophie persists in philosophy. In some loose sense, her endeavors have greater fulfillment by doing philosophy as their hypothetical endpoint—her doing philosophy is part of the explanation as to why she ends up more fulfilled by doing philosophy. But her being in this process does not seem to make her life more meaningful for her via a subjective source.

So let us look for a particular process of becoming more fulfilled that might meet our needs. From here on out, I will use the labels 'the process of becoming more fulfilled' and 'becoming more fulfilled' to speak *only* about the particular process that makes a person's life meaningful for her via a subjective source. I grant that there are other processes for which those labels might be apt, but they will not be my focus in what follows.

The mad-scientist example helps us get started. What is missing in that case, I suggest, is that the connection between her actual endeavors, and the hypothetical endpoint, is too *indirect* for the process she is undergoing to make her life meaningful for her via a subjective source. At the same time, however, this connection should not be too *direct*. Namely, it should not be that her endeavors have this hypothetical endpoint because she has her own greater fulfillment as her *aim*. Sophie can be becoming more fulfilled by doing philosophy, where this is

a subjective source of meaning for her, without that aim; in the simplest case, she will be doing philosophy for its own sake. Indeed, having her own greater fulfillment as one of her aims might be self-defeating if the ‘paradox of hedonism’ is true for fulfillment, which would entail that a person *cannot* have her own greater fulfillment as one of her aims if her endeavors are to have this hypothetical endpoint.

Let me briefly summarize where we are. I suggested moving beyond the *being* (more) fulfilled view of meaning in life to the view that a person’s *becoming* more fulfilled by some *x* makes her life meaningful for her. From an examination of an important case that motivated moving beyond the being (more) fulfilled view, I observed the following necessary condition:

*A Necessary Condition on Becoming More Fulfilled.* When a person is becoming more fulfilled by some *x*, her endeavors vis-à-vis *x* have as their hypothetical endpoint that she is more fulfilled by *x*.

And by examining the mad-scientist example, and considering the live possibility that the ‘paradox of hedonism’ is true of fulfillment, I motivated the following two constraints on spelling out more completely the process of becoming more fulfilled as it relates to meaningfulness:

*The Not-Too-Indirect Constraint.* When becoming more fulfilled by some *x*, it cannot be merely that a person’s endeavors vis-à-vis *x* would play *some* explanatory role in her downstream greater fulfillment by *x*, were she to attain it.

*The Not-Too-Direct Constraint.* When becoming more fulfilled by some *x*, it (likely) cannot be that the person, in endeavoring as she does vis-à-vis *x*, *aims* to end up more fulfilled by *x*.

I now proceed to flesh out the becoming more fulfilled view within these latter two constraints.

## 2.2. The Becoming More Fulfilled View

The key composite of ideas—of acting in a way that has a particular hypothetical endpoint (in a relatively direct way) that the agent need not be directly aiming at—is an interesting and

undertheorized area of philosophy of action.<sup>11</sup> Broadly speaking, there are two strategies for spelling this out. The first posits that the connection between the endpoint and the person's endeavors is secured by the *attitudes* she has toward that endpoint—such as attitudes that structure her downstream deliberations in such a way that bringing about that endpoint is likely, though not what she straightforwardly plans to do (perhaps, e.g., via higher-order planning states or values<sup>12</sup>). But this strategy would need to thread a very fine needle since, the more the person's own attitudes guide her actions toward the endpoint in question, the more it seems that that endpoint is something she *aims* to do.

The second strategy posits that the connection between the endpoint and the person's endeavors is secured, not by her attitudes surrounding and guiding her endeavors, but by the features of those endeavors *de re*. I take this tack. Given the limitations of space and scope, I can only spell out and motivate this view here. Fully fleshed-out arguments *for* it will have to wait, though I will rebut arguments *against* it in sections 3 and 4. Here, in sum, is my idea.

*The Becoming More Fulfilled View.* A person *S*'s becoming more fulfilled by *x* makes her life more meaningful for her when, and only when, *S* aims to do activities  $\Phi = \{\varphi_1, \varphi_2, \dots\}$  *well*, where  $\Phi$ ing well

- d) at least partly constitutes benefiting *x*, and either
- e) requires caring more deeply and richly about *x* than *S* has so far, or
- f) requires doing more of  $\{\varphi_1, \varphi_2, \dots\}$  than *S* has so far.

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<sup>11</sup> The closest that we have come to addressing this question, it seems to me, is by examining the relationship between *intending* to  $\varphi$  and  $\varphi$ ing *intentionally*. Michael Bratman and Al Mele have both denied that a person  $\varphi$ s intentionally only if she intends to  $\varphi$ , and this can be seen as one way to prise apart a person's *aim* from the *endpoints* of her actions—where her aims are constituted by her intentions, and the endpoints of her actions are constituted by what she might intentionally do in virtue of her intentions. However, the relationship between intending to  $\varphi$  and  $\varphi$ ing intentionally remains rather underspecified—for Bratman, the intentional action must be within the 'motivational potential' of the intended action; while, for Mele, the intended action must be 'relevant' to the intentional action (Bratman 1987: chapter 8; and Mele 1992: chapter 8). Moreover, this move has been met with sustained resistance by, for example, Adams (1986), McCann (1986, 1991, 2005, 2010), and Sverdlik (1996). In any case, I doubt the most perspicuous way to spell out the matter of interest is to begin with a division between intention and intentional action.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Bratman (2007).

Importantly, ending up more fulfilled by  $x$  does not here need to be something  $S$  aims at *de dicto*; rather, what she aims at *de re* requires ending up more fulfilled by  $x$ . This strategy thus appeals, as it were, to the deep features of what the person aims to do, independently of her aiming to do it. Let me now flesh out and motivate this idea along a few dimensions.

First,  $\Phi$ ing well benefits  $x$  in the sense that  $\Phi$ ing well (*at least*) *partly constitutes* benefiting  $x$ . This is meant to rule out cases in which  $\Phi$ ing well simply *causes* something further that, on its own, benefits  $x$ .<sup>13</sup> Such a causal link, I take it, comes too cheaply to capture what we're after. At the same time, this formulation allows that  $\Phi$ ing well might *wholly* constitute benefiting  $x$ , though there might be few real-world cases in which that is so.

Second, it should be antecedently clear that nothing can benefit some  $x$  when  $x$  cannot fare better or worse. So this account is restricted to all and only  $x$ s that can fare better or worse. This rules out things like heaps of sand or mathematical truths, but includes any living thing and many non-living things, provided that  $\Phi$ ing well, for some set of activities  $\Phi$ , can (at least) partly constitute benefiting them. I will not endeavor to give comprehensive analyses of faring better or worse, or, concomitantly, benefiting or harming; so much is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. I take it that our ordinary sense of these terms will do for now.

Let me illustrate these two points with examples. Statues can fall apart or corrode, paintings can fade or tear, people can be lonely or sick, institutions can be sclerotic or impotent, practices can lose structure or purpose, and so forth. In ordinary senses of the terms, these things can fare better or worse; accordingly, it is possible to benefit or harm them. For at least some such things, the activities of persons can, when done well, partly constitute such benefit (or harm). While it is implausible that doing anything well can itself partly constitute benefitting a statue, for example, matters are different for people, practices, and, perhaps, institutions. For

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<sup>13</sup> It does *not*, however, rule out cases in which  $\Phi$ ing well partly constitutes benefitting  $x$  *while also* causing something further that benefits  $x$ . There is good reason to allow such cases. See footnote 14.

example, it is plausible that doing philosophy well at least partly constitutes benefitting philosophy; as a practice, philosophy fares better when people are doing philosophy well, and not solely in virtue of the quality of whatever artifacts they produce along the way or however the practitioners (or consumers) of philosophy themselves benefit as a result. Much the same is true of other practices, such as cricket or contemporary dance. For another sort of example, it is plausible that the activities involved in being a good friend, when done well, partly constitute benefitting the person for whom one does them; and this benefit, too, is not solely in virtue of the causal results of those activities vis-à-vis anybody. The activities I have in mind are familiar ones, such as spending time with them and talking through their troubles—activities that benefit the person with whom one spends time or talks with, and not solely in virtue of whether those activities cause something further (such as good feelings or solutions to their problems).<sup>14, 15</sup>

Third, I say that  $\Phi$ ing well requires that  $S$  care more deeply or richly about  $x$  than she has so far, or that it requires that  $S$  do more of  $\{\phi_1, \phi_2, \dots\}$  than she has so far. Since I take the latter disjunct to be clear enough, I'll elaborate only on the former. The requirement is not an unrestricted metaphysical necessity, such as that it is metaphysically necessary to care about  $x$  to some relatively high degree when  $\Phi$ ing well. I doubt there is any such metaphysically necessary threshold. Rather, the requirement arises due to the kind of agent  $S$  is, including her abilities and limitations: it is necessary *for her* to care about  $x$  to some degree when  $\Phi$ ing well.

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<sup>14</sup> My use of the locution 'not solely in virtue of' here is meant to remain agnostic about the possibility that  $\Phi$ ing well partly constitutes a benefit to  $x$ , where this partial constitution itself depends on further features—which is plausibly the case when the various constituents of a benefit must form an 'organic unity' to really *be* a benefit. This possibility is particularly salient in the friendship example: it is plausible that spending time with one another *does not* benefit each friend *without* concomitant good feelings, while, nevertheless, the benefit is not solely in virtue of those good feelings. This is plausible because it seems that, if we could through some sci-fi mechanism zap each friend into having the good feelings they would have from spending time together, it would still seem as though each friend was not faring as well as they would had they actually spent time together.

<sup>15</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to elaborate how my theory applies to becoming more fulfilled by  $x$  when  $x$  is not itself an activity.

To see why this difference is important, consider again doing philosophy. It is certainly metaphysically possible for some agent to do philosophy well without caring a whit about it. We could imagine that she possesses immense cognitive capacities, very few alternatives, and can be motivated enough to do it on the slightest stimulation. Such an agent might be able to do philosophy well merely by contemplating a question and proceeding to slice and dice the logical space as long as it takes to come to a plausible answer. For us, however, things are obviously not so simple: a variety of alternatives compete for our attention and energy, many philosophical questions leave us unmotivated, and we cannot effortlessly recognize the wide range of options for answering such questions. Accordingly, for us, exploring and offering plausible answers to philosophical questions requires considerable cognitive, attentive, emotional, and motivational resources. In short, doing this work well has to *matter* to us in some way and to a significant degree. There are many practices like this, including sports, artistic endeavors, and 'knowledge work'. Of course, many practices require considerably fewer resources, such as the less demanding drinking game flip cup; still, to the extent that playing flip cup well requires developing the relevant skills, doing it well has to matter to us in some way and to some degree.

In interpersonal cases, things are similarly straightforward. When doing things well that partly constitute benefiting another person, we must summon cognitive, attentive, emotional, and motivational resources to attend to their needs or desires, recognize what we can do to meet those needs or desires, and be motivated to act accordingly; and all of this we must do against a background in which a variety of other options compete for our attention and energy. Often, the requisite resources are considerable; sometimes the person in question needs quite a lot, or our antecedent motivations are too weak. Of course, sometimes this is not so: sometimes doing something well to benefit another person is rather easy. The point is just that the other person must *matter* to us, commensurate with the work that must be done to benefit them.

But I do not mean to overstate matters. This is the fourth and final elaboration I wish to make. When it comes to becoming more fulfilled by  $x$  in the sense relevant to meaningfulness, what matters is only that the requisite degree (in terms of depth and richness) of caring be *greater* than the degree to which the person has cared about  $x$  so far. This can be so whether the requisite degree is considerable or not.<sup>16</sup>

Let me now step back a bit. It should be clear that the becoming more fulfilled view postulates a genuinely subjective source of meaning. After all, the process is completed by the person in question ending up more *fulfilled* by the things in her life. Moreover, since the process is completed by ending up *more* fulfilled, it makes essential reference to what matters to her along the way. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the endpoint of greater fulfillment is secured by what she actively aims to do along the way.

There are at least two aspects to this view that are not fully spelled out, and it is worth being explicit about this. First, I have offered no account of *how* a person comes to be more fulfilled by  $x$ . In light of the mad scientist example above, which gave rise to the Not-Too-Indirect Constraint, it seems right that the person comes to be more fulfilled by  $x$ , when she does, through  $\Phi$ ing, where  $\Phi$ ing *well* meets the above requirements. Moreover, it seems right that her  $\Phi$ ing should play a non-deviant explanatory role of some kind, rather than

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<sup>16</sup> It should be clear that there will be cases in which person  $S$  already cares about  $x$  to the requisite degree, and already does well everything involved that at least partly constitutes benefiting  $x$ . On my account, she will thereby not be becoming more fulfilled by  $x$  in the sense that makes her life more meaningful for her. To be sure, such instances are typically preceded by becoming more fulfilled by  $x$ , and hence such a person's life will already be meaningful for her to some degree; I am here granting only that my account has it that her life is not made *more* meaningful for her, with respect to  $x$ , going forward. My account thus has a consequence worth being explicit about that concerns people living so-called 'completed lives'. These people are already highly fulfilled and doing everything well that partly constitutes benefiting those things and people they care about, and are thus not becoming *more* fulfilled by *anything* anymore. A consequence of my account is that their lives are not made any *more* meaningful for them in virtue of their present engagements. While I am not denying that completed lives can be rather meaningful, this result still might strike some as counterintuitive. I try to ameliorate this feeling in section 4 with my discussion of the piano master. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for remarks on this consequence.

being merely causally implicated.<sup>17</sup> Beyond this, I doubt that any perfectly general story can be told across all *xs* by which a person can become more fulfilled; the details will matter, and particular accounts ought to give due attention to the particulars of each kind of case.

Second, I have not yet extended the becoming more fulfilled view to account for the *degree* of meaningfulness that stretches of this process might underwrite; this is important since various things can make a life meaningful for someone to varying degrees. I will develop this dimension in section 4, where the issue arises organically.

### 3. Two Arguments against Subjectivism

Susan Wolf considers lives that strike her as meaningless—for example, lives entirely devoted to solving crossword puzzles, smoking pot, making hand-written copies of *War and Peace*, and rolling a rock up a hill—in which it is stipulated that the people involved have every subjective quality that could plausibly matter for whether their lives are meaningful. Because they have every such quality, the meaninglessness of their lives is not plausibly explained in terms of an absence of some such subjective feature. This would be a significant strike against subjectivism if it were true (2010: 16–18; cf. Bramble 2015: 448, Metz 2013b: 175, and Smuts 2013: 541–544).

Of course, Wolf is sensitive to the fact that others might not share her intuitions about these lives, so she tries to offer evidence that these lives *are* meaningless, evidence that is independent from her initial intuitions. She focuses her argument on one such life, trusting (as I will) that it is in all important respects the same as the others. She considers a variation (due to Richard Taylor) of the mythical Sisyphus who is just like the original Sisyphus save that the gods, in a fit of mercy, “[implant] in him a strange and irrational impulse...to roll stones”, thereby “[giving] Sisyphus precisely what he wants—by making him want precisely what they

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<sup>17</sup> *Non-deviant* causal explanations are a general philosophical issue in both the philosophy of action and of dispositions; so this requirement is not a problem for my account in particular (Setiya 2018: section 2).

inflict on him” (Taylor 2000: 323). Taylor goes on to observe that “Sisyphus’ fate now does not appear to him as a condemnation, but the very reverse. His one desire in life is to roll stones, and he is absolutely guaranteed its endless fulfillment” (*ibid.*). Despite the fact that he now takes great pleasure in his task, he feels fulfilled by it, he views his own life not as one of condemnation but the opposite, etc., his life is not meaningful, Wolf argues, because the activity around which his life is built is futile, unproductive, and pointless:

[T]he reason Sisyphus has traditionally been taken as a paradigm of a meaningless existence is that he is condemned to the perpetual performance of a task that is boring, difficult, and futile. In Taylor’s variation, Sisyphus’s task is no longer boring—no longer boring to Sisyphus, that is. But it remains futile. There is no value to his efforts; nothing ever comes of them. Even if due to divine intervention, Sisyphus comes to enjoy and even to feel fulfilled by his activity, the pointlessness of what he is doing doesn’t change (2010: 17).

It is worth taking a moment to show why this argument, if it works, strikes against the becoming more fulfilled view. A Sisyphus who cares a great deal about rolling a rock up a hill cares about doing an activity that is plausibly of a goodness-fixing kind—there is something that it is to roll a rock up a hill *well*, that is plausibly determined by what it is to roll a rock up a hill—and his doing it can change his cares in a way partly explained by his antecedently caring as he does. For example, as he rolls the rock up the hill, he might find out that taking a certain path is faster and requires less effort from him, and thus that rolling it well involves doing that; and he can thereby come to care that he does so on future laps. Provided all of this is true, the becoming more fulfilled view will say that Sisyphus’ life is at least somewhat meaningful for him. So if Wolf has provided us with evidence that his life is *not* at all meaningful, the view has a problem. However, she has not: Sisyphus’ activity is not pointless, unproductive, or futile.

It helps to see this by keeping an eye firmly fixed on what Sisyphus’ goal actually is: to roll the stone up the hill over and over again. His goal is *not* to roll the stone up the hill and place it at the top; the gods’ mercy was precisely to give him a desire to do the very thing they

condemned him to do. And, it should be noted, he succeeds in his goal: he rolls the stone up the hill over and over again.<sup>18</sup>

So when Wolf insists his goal remains futile, we should wonder in what sense this is true; it is evidently *not* true if she means to say that he cannot enjoy any success. Nor is it true that his efforts are unproductive, which is to say that his effort produces nothing further. Indeed, perhaps she is elaborating on this point when she says, “There is no value to his efforts; nothing ever comes of them” (2010: 17; see also Levy 2005: 178, and Martela 2017: 240). His success—his doing what he wants deeply to do—produces pleasure and feelings of fulfillment. An uncaredful reading of the case can cause us to miss this point. The mercy of the gods is not that Sisyphus is injected with a kind of Feel Good Drug that gives him indiscriminate, warm feelings of pleasure and fulfillment; no, they implant in him a *desire* to live a certain kind of life. The pleasure and feelings of fulfillment follow in the wake of his acting on this desire with success, not his being in an experience-machine-type situation where his pleasure and feelings of fulfillment bear no connection to his active participation in the world.

Finally, there is the charge of pointlessness. Sisyphus’ efforts evidently *do* have a point, albeit one that is internal to the activity itself. Many activities are like this: the point of going for a walk is sometimes just to go for a walk; the point of playing tag is sometimes just to play tag. We often endeavor to do these things for their own sakes, not because we hope to achieve something further, not because our activities have some further point.<sup>19</sup> If Wolf means that there is some further point, distinct from the activity itself, that Sisyphus’ activity lacks, she is surely

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<sup>18</sup> Sisyphus’ goal here is to do what Setiya has called an *atelic*, as opposed to *telic*, activity (2014). Having a telic activity as one’s goal is for one’s goal to be extinguished upon successfully doing the activity (which is not to say that one cannot adopt the goal, and so do the activity, *again*); when one’s goal is an atelic activity, successfully doing the activity is compatible with the persistence of the goal and the activity (that is, with one’s *continuing* to have the goal and to do the activity).

<sup>19</sup> Of course, one might say that the point of going for a walk even in these cases is to satisfy a desire or to obtain some pleasure, but neither of those things is the intentional object of the person going for a walk in these cases. And even if it were, this exact explanation could be given of Sisyphus’ efforts, too.

right. But she had better say more about why activities lacking in further point cannot make for a meaningful life. On its face, such a claim is implausible because activities that we do for their own sakes often play a part in making our lives meaningful.

So the principal task of the objectivist, vis-à-vis these sorts of cases, remains: She still needs to provide us with compelling evidence that lives like Sisyphus' are meaningless. Now, some theorists take lives like Sisyphus' to be so obviously meaningless, solely on the basis of their intuitions, that they do not take themselves to need any additional evidence.<sup>20</sup> I will discuss this at the end of section 4.

Shifting gears now, it has also been argued that subjectivism about meaning implies that no one can be mistaken about the degree of meaning their own lives have; that people *can* be so mistaken; and therefore that subjectivism is false. For example, as Aaron Smuts characterizes it, subjectivist theories “hold that fulfillment or some other subjective state is what makes a life meaningful. On such views, one’s life is meaningful if one finds it meaningful or, we might say, fulfilling” (2013: 537). Smuts later says that “the theory implies that no one can be wrong about how meaningful or meaningless [their life is]<sup>21</sup>.... But George Bailey’s despair [in *It’s a Wonderful Life*] gives us excellent reason to reject such a view. On his dark night of the soul, George mistakenly thought that his life was meaningless” (2013: 544). Similarly, Antti Kauppinen rejects subjectivism on the grounds that “[j]ust as a food can be unhealthy for a person even if she thinks it is healthy, a life can be meaningless for someone even if she thinks it is meaningful” (2012: 356).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Bramble (2015: 454), Metz (2013b: 175) and Smuts (2013: 543–544).

<sup>21</sup> I have substituted the phrase in brackets for Smuts’ original formulation, which said “the theory implies that no one can be wrong about how meaningful or meaningless *they find their life*” (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). I take this to be a charitable clarification. If Smuts’ point is that subjectivism implies, falsely, that no one can be mistaken about how meaningful they find their own lives to be, then he would have to draw a case in which someone found their life to have a certain degree of meaning, but then possessed a mistaken, second-order opinion about *that*. This is clearly not what Smuts is trying to do.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Kauppinen is rejecting only one variety of subjectivism, the view he attributes to Taylor (2000). However, this objection is the only one Kauppinen levels against subjectivism of any

The problem with this argument is the first premise. Subjectivism in no way implies that a person cannot be mistaken about whether her life is meaningful for her, or how meaningful it is. Subjectivism is just the view that meaning has no objective-value requirement—that it is false that only objectively valuable activities can make a person life meaningful for her—plus the claim that what makes a person’s life meaningful for her is, in part, contingent features of the person herself. This is compatible with that person being mistaken either about those features, even within herself, that make her life meaningful for her; or about the fact that it is those features that make her life meaningful for her. Still, a specific moral to draw from this argument is that a *particular version* of subjectivism—the view that what makes a person’s life meaningful for her is her thinking that it is—is false. And a more general moral is that, since people can be mistaken about whether their lives are meaningful for them, the right theory of what makes a life meaningful will be built around facts that people can plausibly be mistaken about.

To see that this constraint can be easily met, let me show how the becoming fulfilled view does so. As discussed in section 2, this view says that what makes a person’s life meaningful for her is her becoming more fulfilled by some  $x$ , which is a process in which she aims to do activities  $\Phi$  well, where  $\Phi$ ing well at least partly constitutes benefiting  $x$ , and requires that she be more fulfilled by  $x$  than she presently is. A person can be mistaken about whether she is undergoing this process, not least because she can be mistaken about the extent to which her activities (done well) benefit various persons, objects, practices, etc. (George Bailey is just such an example: He is mistaken about the extent to which his actions benefit his community.) Moreover, a person can be mistaken about whether doing some activity well requires that she be more fulfilled than she presently is. For example, it is easy enough to be mistaken about how much, and in what ways, philosophy has to matter to oneself to do it well—as when, for example,

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variety before moving on to non-subjectivist alternatives, and so it can be reasonably read as his grounds for rejecting subjectivism as such.

a person mistakes philosophy for a glorified parlor game, or an all-consuming life-project. And of course a person can be mistaken about the extent to which she is already fulfilled by the things in her life, since subtle shifts in our cares—their refocusing, straying, deepening, and so forth—sometimes happen in ways our higher-order reflection does not recognize. And, finally, even if she were not mistaken about such things, she could still be mistaken about the fact that it is this process that makes her life meaningful for her.

#### 4. On Intuitions and Assessments

Finally, subjectivist theories are frequently charged with producing counterintuitive results. Because subjectivism denies that meaning has a necessary objective value condition, activities wholly lacking in objective value can at least in principle make a person's life meaningful for her. Activities like counting blades of grass (from Rawls 1971: 432) or eating excrement (Wielenberg 2005: 22) can and will do so provided whatever conditions the subjectivist theory in question places on meaning can be met for these activities. The charge of counterintuitiveness comes once a particular subjectivist theory is under consideration, and a case is drawn showing how, even when the conditions that comprise that theory are met, the activity intuitively does not make a person's life meaningful.<sup>23</sup>

However, there is good reason to tread lightly with the intuitions we are deploying in such arguments. Consider the following quote from Wielenberg, in which he discusses a concert pianist and the excrement-eater, both of whom are imagined to be fulfilled by what they do:

Both the pianist and the grinning excrement-eater are engaged in activity for which they have a genuine passion; each is doing what he [or she] most wants to do. Imagine these two lives, one filled with the sort of activity in which [the pianist] is engaged..., the second filled with the grinning excrement-eater's

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<sup>23</sup> The charge is put in its most general terms by Metz (2013b: 175). In the literature, it is typical to bring this argument to bear against Taylor's (2000) theory in particular; see, for example, Smuts (2013: 543–544) and Wielenberg (2005: 22).

favorite pastime.... If you were offered a choice between these two lives, would you be indifferent? Would the two lives seem equally worthwhile to you? If you are like me, the answer is no (2005: 22).

The fulfilled excrement-eater is supposed to show that being fulfilled does not make a person's life meaningful. Let us assume, with Wielenberg, that worth and meaning have a relatively tight connection.<sup>24</sup> And let us assume that we would similarly prefer the concert pianist's life, and that hers seems more worthwhile to us than the excrement-eater's. The reason to tread lightly is that it is not obvious which sorts of intuitions are being reported in assessments like these.

To see why this matters, notice that the subjectivist can just say that the intuition reported here is that the concert pianist's life is more meaningful *for us*—that is, as lived by you or me. Furthermore, she can explain naturally why we have such an intuition: you and I actually care about doing things like playing the piano, and not eating excrement; so you and I, as we actually are, would be fulfilled by playing the piano, but not eating excrement.<sup>25</sup> If that is all that is going on in our assessments of cases like these, then subjectivism comes out unscathed; the charge of counterintuitiveness does not stick.

So the objectivist needs us to have intuitions of a rather different sort. One possibility is the intuition that the pianist's life is more meaningful, *period*—that is, not as lived by any person in particular. The objectivist might insist that we are capable of evaluating the degree of meaning in lives in a way sharply disconnected from any portfolio of cares—and thus capable of having intuitions about meaningfulness, *period*—and that we can draw cases about which we have just such intuitions. But it is hard to see how this insistence is not question begging. After

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<sup>24</sup> Against this, see Metz (2012) and Martela (2017).

<sup>25</sup> It does not help that we are being asked to imagine that we care about eating excrement. This just highlights that the situation we are assessing is a little more complicated: eating excrement while caring about doing so. That situation can still be one we are assessing from our *actual* point of view, constituted by, among other things, what we actually care about. I can perfectly well acknowledge that, were I to care about eating excrement, I would be fulfilled by it, even while maintaining that I, as I actually am, would not be fulfilled by eating excrement while caring about doing.

all, the whole point of subjectivism is that the meaning in a life is inseparable from the contingent features of the person whose life it is—and, when the particular theory is a fulfillment one, those features will ineluctably involve what the person cares about.

A more promising possibility is that we can have intuitions of the following form: that the concert pianist's life is more meaningful *for her* than the excrement-eater's life is *for him*.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, having such an intuition must rely on some background metric whereby the meaning-for-the-pianist can be measured against the meaning-for-the-excrement-eater. And this background metric might be determined at least in part by the amount of objective value of the activities in each life, as the objectivist maintains; or it might be determined without that, as the subjectivist does. However, as long as we can have these intuitions before settling the latter question, as I submit we can, then theorists can count on our being able to have intuitions of this form without begging the question. So henceforth I will put the counterintuitiveness charge(s) against subjectivism in these terms.

Start with the following. A particular subjectivist theory will be counterintuitive when it implies, for example, that the concert pianist's life is not more meaningful for her than the excrement-eater's is for him.

The becoming more fulfilled view has plenty to say here. On this view, a person's life is made meaningful for her through aiming to do activities well, where doing so is beneficial and requires ending up more fulfilled. Playing piano well meets these criteria: playing piano well benefits the practice of playing piano (among other things), and, at least for a long time, required that the concert pianist end up more fulfilled by it than she was as an amateur or novice. After all, she had to learn a variety of new ways to play and to come to care about playing piano in deeper and richer ways. Accordingly, the concert pianist was becoming more fulfilled by

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<sup>26</sup> Recall that I am not using the qualifiers 'for her' and 'for him' to refer to how meaningful these people think or feel their lives are. See footnote 4.

playing piano for a long time, and doing so made her life meaningful for her. Eating excrement does not meet these criteria because there is no coherent notion of doing this activity *well*, nor anything for which doing it well at least partly constitutes a benefit.

Now, the explanation I just gave depended on the proviso that the concert pianist's activities and cares were shaped over time through her aim of playing piano well. So there is a slightly different charge of counterintuitiveness in the neighborhood: that the becoming more fulfilled view implies, falsely, that the concert pianist's life is more meaningful for her when her activities and cares are changed in this way than it would be if they were not. To make the charge most forceful, we could imagine two concert pianists: a journeyman who is becoming more fulfilled by playing piano in these aforementioned ways; and a master who simply continues to play piano well and to care about doing so, with all the richness, depth, and subtlety we expect of her. It is plausible that the master is no longer becoming more fulfilled by playing piano. And it might strike us as counterintuitive to say that, by continuing to play the piano, only the journeyman is making her life any more meaningful for herself.

Yet this claim does not strike me as counterintuitive at all. We can grant that the master's life is already very meaningful for her, and has been made so by the history she has with playing the piano, the excellence she has cultivated thereby, and the intimacy she has developed with it. The question is whether her continuing to play the piano *now* adds anything to that. But we stipulate that her cares never change again in response to playing, and that she does not play the piano well in new ways.<sup>27</sup> In light of that, her personal relationship with playing piano seems also set in stone. It would be reasonable for her to feel that spending the rest of her life doing that would amount to just more of the same, and to look on the journeyman with a bit of envy,

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<sup>27</sup> These stipulations need not apply to actual masters—see the discussion a couple paragraphs down.

wishing she too had such an open future within their vocation. In short, it would be reasonable for her to have a midlife crisis, one that I see no reason not to call a crisis of meaning.

A slightly different way to press the challenge to my view is by appealing to ‘born’ rather than ‘learned’ masters, people who do what they do extremely well, and care very deeply and richly about it, virtually from day one.<sup>28</sup> It might seem that, regarding such people, my view would have it that their lives are not meaningful for them at all because they never become more fulfilled by what they masterfully do. This challenge, however, presupposes a false view of actual mastery, born or otherwise. Consider, first, that certified prodigies like Mozart or March Tian Boedihardjo learn a lot about how to do what they do well, and how to care about it in deeper and richer ways (though they do so quickly). Second, and more importantly, once they become masters of the state of the art, they usually push the boundaries of their field in new directions. These are interesting cases, to be sure, but not because they cannot become more fulfilled by music or mathematics; rather, I suspect, because they change *what counts as* making music or doing mathematics well, and open up new and exciting ways to do these things. This very fact allows them to continue to become more fulfilled by music or math: their own endeavors create new ways to do (well) what they care about, and (typically) new ways to care about it.

These dynamics of mastery not only apply to born masters like Mozart, but to learned masters like the pianist from a couple turns back. When it comes to practices like music, art, or philosophy, what it is to do these things well, and which ways there are to do so, are changed through the practice itself—especially the masters’ doing of it. And this open-ended refinement of the practice typically brings open-ended refinement of our cares in its train. Because of this, the becoming more fulfilled view does not have it that masters’ lives are not made any more meaningful for them when they have such mastery—far from it. Rather, I think the becoming

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<sup>28</sup> My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this line.

more fulfilled view upholds these practices as those through which an *ideally* or *maximally* meaningful life can be lead, one in which becoming more fulfilled can proceed indefinitely.<sup>29</sup>

Let us return to the main thread and level the counterintuitiveness charge in one last way. I have emphasized that in becoming more fulfilled by some *x*, the activities through which a person does so need not be objectively good. It is therefore possible to draw cases in which one person is becoming more fulfilled through an activity that is plausibly very objectively good, and a second person is becoming more fulfilled through an activity that is not. For example, we might compare the concert pianist's life against one entirely devoted to the sophomoric drinking game flip cup, and imagine that both individuals are becoming more fulfilled through their respective activities in the way my view states: both are aiming to do what they do well, and doing so both benefits the practice in question and requires greater fulfillment on their part. It is intuitive that the concert pianist's life is more meaningful for her than the flip-cup player's life is for him. The charge is then that the becoming more fulfilled view cannot get this result.

At its root, this challenges the view's ability to recover intuitive differences in the *degree* to which various lives are meaningful for those who lead them. This is an important challenge that I can only begin to address in this paper. First, notice that playing piano is a more complex activity than playing flip cup, one that admits of greater degrees of subtlety, variation, and innovation. Indeed, greater degrees of such subtlety, variation, and innovation are plausibly *required* to play piano well than to play flip-cup well. For this reason, it also plausibly requires deeper and richer caring to do well—the skilled piano player must attend to and be moved by a

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<sup>29</sup> The themes broached here are discussed at some length by Neil Levy. For him, *projects* make a life meaningful, which are activities in which “the goal they pursue is not fixed prior to the activity itself. Instead, the goal is gradually defined and more precisely specified in the course of its pursuit, so that the end of the activity is always itself one of its stakes” (2005: 184–185). Levy is, however, an objectivist: for him, ‘supreme value’ is part of what is at stake in projects (2005: 185).

wider and more complicated array of considerations, and she must respond to these considerations intensely and sensitively.

These observations support the idea that a person can become more fulfilled through playing piano *to a greater extent than* she can through playing flip-cup, but this comparison requires clarification. To make headway on this, my remarks on mastery can help. I suggested that lives devoted to mastering practices that admit of open-ended refinement can be seen as maximally meaningful lives because they permit the process of becoming more fulfilled to proceed indefinitely. Using such practices as a kind of yardstick suggests that how meaningful a life is for the person who lives it is a matter of *how long* she can become more fulfilled through the activities she does. Practices like philosophy, music, or math, which admit of open-ended refinement, allow a person to become more fulfilled indefinitely; simpler and less mutable practices like flip-cup allow this to a much more limited extent. This can go some way to explain why the concert pianist's life is more meaningful for her than the flip-cup player's life is for him. And, finally, it can help explain why people who devote their lives to playing flip cup, or rolling a rock up a hill over and over again, or solving classic Sudoku puzzles, are missing out (whether by choice or divine condemnation) on lives more meaningful for them than theirs.

## 5. Concluding Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to outline and defend a novel but modest subjectivist theory about meaning in life. On this theory, a certain way of becoming more fulfilled makes a person's life meaningful for her via a genuinely subjective source. This theory is modest because it remains agnostic as to whether there are non-subjective sources of meaning, such as engagement with objectively valuable pursuits.

Becoming more fulfilled is, in general, a process with being more fulfilled as its hypothetical endpoint. Of particular relevance to meaning in life is becoming more fulfilled by some  $x$  in the following way: aiming to do a set of activities well, which at least partly constitute benefiting  $x$  and require the person to end up more fulfilled by  $x$  than she presently is. I motivated and spelled out this view in sections 1 and 2, contrasting the view specifically against a more standard fulfillment view that says that what makes a life meaningful for a person is her being fulfilled. The particular advantage of the becoming more fulfilled view stems from its emphasis on a particular process (of becoming more fulfilled) as opposed to a particular state (of being fulfilled); my view thereby allows for cases of meaningful lives in which the person is not, in fact, fulfilled by that life. This is because, like any process, becoming more fulfilled can halt before it is complete, before fulfillment is achieved. I showed that this is an advantage by discussing the case of a person writing philosophy who, though it has come to leave her cold, persists in the hope of recovering her passion for it; writing philosophy makes her life meaningful for her whether or not she in fact recovers her passion.

The remainder of the paper defended the becoming more fulfilled view against charges levelled against subjectivism. Section 3 responded to two arguments, the first by Susan Wolf and the second by Antti Kauppinen and Aaron Smuts. Wolf considers a varieties of lives, dedicated to activities like rolling a rock or solving crossword puzzles, in which she stipulates that every subjective quality is in place that could plausibly matter for meaning. She then suggests that the fact that these lives are pointless, unproductive, and futile is evidence that they are meaningless nonetheless; and this clearly would pose a problem for subjectivism in general, and, as I show, the becoming more fulfilled view in particular. I responded by arguing that these lives are not, *pace* Wolf, pointless, unproductive, or futile, and so she has not provided us with such evidence. Of course, such lives might strike one as so obviously meaningless, on the basis of one's own

intuitions, that one feels no need to offer any such evidence; I deferred my response to this until section 4. Kauppinen and Smuts, for their part, argue that subjectivism implies, falsely, that no person can be mistaken about how meaningful their own lives are. I responded by pointing out that subjectivism as such does not at all imply this. Subjectivism is the view that not only objectively valuable activities can make a person's life meaningful for her, and that contingent subjective features of her are at least part of what does. A person can very well be mistaken about how meaningful her life is on such a view.

Finally, I showed in section 4 that the becoming more fulfilled view is not counterintuitive, once we are careful about what sorts of intuitions we are expressing in our assessments of lives. As a preliminary matter, I argued that we should take care to weigh subjectivism against intuitions about how meaningful a life is *for the very person whose life it is*, as well as intuitions involving comparisons of the same form between multiple persons vis-à-vis their own lives; this is, in short, so as not to beg the question against subjectivism, but nor to give it too easy a way out. I then showed that the becoming more fulfilled view produces broadly intuitive results. It can say, for example, that lives devoted to activities like eating excrement, watching paint dry, etc. are entirely meaningless for the people living such lives, because those activities cannot be part of the process of becoming more fulfilled. And, even among lives devoted to activities that can be a part of this process, the view can say that some are more meaningful than others for the people involved just when and because the activities involved allow for becoming more fulfilled to a greater extent.

The idea of becoming more fulfilled to a greater extent requires further analysis in future work, but I suggested that how masters (born or learned) engage with their craft can be illuminative. In particular, I suggested that their lives are maximally or ideally meaningful (via a subjective source, at any rate) because the process of becoming more fulfilled can proceed

indefinitely. Extending this idea, I suggested that *the extent* to which a person can become more fulfilled through some activity is matter of *how long* she can become more fulfilled through it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented to audiences at Stanford University and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Special thanks are due to Michael Bratman, Berit Braun, Daniele Bruno, Francesca Bunkenborg, Phillip Fox, Nadeem Hussain, Barry Maguire, Thomas Schmidt, Razvan Sofroni, David Streit, and anonymous reviewers for their very helpful feedback.

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