

Mortality AND MEANINGFULNESS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sheffield

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of Philosophy

Submitted May 2018

Abstract

Some have claimed that human life is inevitably meaningless because we are mortal. Others have claimed the opposite: that life would be meaningless if we never died, and our being mortal is actually an essential condition for our lives to have any meaning at all. The aim of this thesis is to evaluate the arguments that have or could be used to support these claims, and come to a conclusion about which position, if either, is correct.

Part One provides an introduction to the problem and an overview of various accounts of meaningfulness which can be found in the literature before outlining a broader and more defensible amalgam theory of meaningfulness. According to this theory, a life is ideally meaningful if and only if, and to the extent that, it contains sufficient degrees of purposefulness, significance, and coherence.

In Part Two, the thesis moves on to systematically consider arguments that immortal life would be meaningless because it would lack each of these three essential ingredients of meaningfulness. In every case, immortality is defended against such arguments. Part Three covers the counterpart arguments which might be aimed at mortal life and reaches a comparable conclusion.

Part Four summarises the findings and lessons of the thesis. In short, mortality can affect the meaningfulness of our lives in various ways, as would its absence. Nevertheless, mortality is neither entirely destructive of life’s meaningfulness nor one of its necessary conditions; a life can be meaningful whether or not it ends in death.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my primary supervisor Christopher Bennett. There is no doubt in my mind that I would not be in the position I am today without his consistent encouragement and guidance, both pushing me when I needed to go further and pulling me back when I was heading off-track. If this thesis is in good shape, a great deal of the credit should go to Chris. I would also like to thank my secondary supervisor James Lenman, and my examiners Ben Bramble and Yonatan Shemmer for taking the time to read this piece of work and sharing their genuinely valuable thoughts and insights with me. Moreover, I would like to express my gratitude to the University of Sheffield Philosophy Department as a whole for providing me with a relaxed, friendly, and supportive place to study philosophy for nearly a decade, and for funding me through the majority of this.

I owe particular appreciation to Elizabeth, Huw, and Maggy Thomas whose financial contributions over the years have allowed me to focus on my work without the distraction of the dreaded part-time job, and whose effort and intelligence as discussion partners and proof-readers have drastically improved this thesis. My achievements in philosophy, whatever they may be, belong partly to them and to the rest of my family at large, for bringing me up in an environment where reflectiveness and intellectual curiosity were prized and nurtured. My final thanks go to these relations, my friends, and my partner Laura, whose love and companionship have helped me navigate this subject without getting lost in the darkness.

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Part One

1. Outline

When the question of life’s meaning is broached in our more profound discussions, the concept of mortality never seems too far away. This may simply be because it is the meaning of *human* life which we are typically discussing, and human beings are mortal beings. However, there are also some reasons for thinking a deeper and more profound connection might exist between mortality and meaning or meaningfulness: for example, revelations about the meaning of life are often connected to a certain sort of death-bed reflection on one’s existence, as depicted in Tolstoy’s moving, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886);anecdotally, the diagnosis of terminal illnesses appears to be commonly met with a renewed drive to make the most of life, and thereby live more meaningfully; and, in response to the ‘big’ question about the meaning of life, we are frequently asked to consider what might happen after we die, either indicating a suspicion that the question might be resolved eschatologically, or perhaps drawing our attention to some alleged afterlife of the soul (or metaphorical afterlife in one’s children, works, or reputation) as a kind of answer itself.

My broad aim for this thesis is to examine whether there is indeed a relationship between mortality and the meaning in our lives and, if there is, what this relationship might be. Specifically, I want to settle a disagreement between two schools of thought, one which holds that death is entirely incompatible with or destructive of our life’s meaning, and the other which denies this and holds that mortality is, in fact, a necessary condition for our lives to have any meaning at all. The first thought has been expressed time and time again, from Tolstoy (1905) to Ecclesiastes (New International Version, 2.14), and perhaps even as far back as the Epic of Gilgamesh (often regarded as the earliest surviving work of literature). Whilst the second thought, though perhaps representing a more modern attitude, also finds widespread support from writers, such as Jorge Luis Borges (1949), and philosophers (both continental and analytic), such as Heidegger (1962), Bernard Williams (1973), and Samuel Scheffler (2013).

Despite the popularity of each position, and the tendency for interlocutors here to state their respective conclusions as if they were more-or-less self-evident, it is clear that these two positions are contradictory, and so at least one must be mistaken; the first group, which I will call ‘immortalists’, believe that life could only be meaningful if we *never* died and lived on forever, whilst the second group, which I will call ‘mortalists’, believe that life could only be meaningful if we *do* die at some point, and hence *will not* live forever. We can also distinguish varieties of both positions which are weaker, though still incompatible with each other. The weak immortalist thesis would be that, whilst mortality isn’t entirely incompatible or destructive of meaning, the fact that we will die has an overwhelmingly *negative* effect on the meaningfulness of our lives. On the other hand, the weak mortalist thesis would be that, whilst mortality isn’t strictly necessary for our lives to have *any* meaning, the fact that we will die has an overwhelmingly *positive* effect on the meaningfulness of our lives.

My project will be to systematically examine the arguments proposed both for and against each side of the debate, to draw conclusions about which ones are successful and to what extent, and thus to arrive at a final judgement about the relationship between mortality and meaning in our lives, how strong it is, and whether it is positive, negative, or mixed. This project is worth undertaking for several key reasons. First, a great deal of time and effort has already been spent on this dispute, but on a host of different fronts. Thus, a thorough and methodical cataloguing of the different arguments, and their strengths and weaknesses, would be beneficial for all involved, and bring structure and clarity to any future debate.

Second, the question of the meaning of life, or what makes life meaningful, is treated by many as essentially *the* most important question one can ask; a person who knew the answer to such a question would typically be seen as being in possession of *the* most important piece of information that exists and/or a recipe for how to live *the* most choice-worthy sort of life. Thus, one eminently worthwhile thing my project can accomplish is to shed some light on the subject. Examining, in detail, the relationship between meaning and mortality is likely to provide some insight into what meaningfulness is, why we desire it, and perhaps the best way of securing it in our own lives, amongst other things. I will try to identify these lessons throughout and bring them together in the final chapter.

Third, mortality is a feature of our existence which many find deeply troubling (as we shall see). Therefore, it may be welcome if my project can also shed some light on this matter as well. For instance, a considered examination of death’s relationship to meaning should help to reveal to us how our death does or does not actually impact upon our lives, and how life might be different if we never died. This project could thus potentially help to inform a more nuanced or accurate attitude towards our death, for instance, teaching us whether we should approach it with fear or gratitude, and why.

Finally, although death has always been ultimately unavoidable, historical scientific advances have allowed human beings to live longer and longer. If this trend continues (worries about the longevity of our universe aside), it may be that one day we are able to extend human life indefinitely. It is thus important that we establish whether immortality would be essential or catastrophic for our chances of living meaningful lives, since the truth of the matter here would presumably have a drastic bearing on our opinions regarding whether radical life-extending technologies should be implemented or even researched in the first place.

My thesis will be divided up into four parts and nine chapters. The remainder of Part One – Chapter 2 – will contain a brief taxonomy of different existing theories of what makes life meaningful, and their various strengths and weaknesses. It will also contain my own sketched ‘amalgam’ theory to be carried through into the rest of my discussions, essentially, that a life will be ideally meaningful if and only if (and to the extent that) *three* things are present: I. purposeful activity, II. significance, and III. a kind of coherence or comprehensibility. I will then use this theory to categorise and structure the various mortalist and immortalist arguments I will discuss, depending on which of these three components of meaning they most closely interact with.

Part Two will deal with the most prominent arguments for the mortalist position that death is necessary for life to be meaningful. First, Chapter 3 will focus on arguments that immortal beings could not be engaged enough with life to pursue the kind of *purposeful activity* necessary for meaning. These arguments typically revolve around the idea that some kind of temporal scarcity is necessary for human beings to value the contents of their lives or feel motivated to pursue their goals. For instance, that without the deadline of death, immortal beings would forever postpone their projects, leaving a completely empty life. I argue that these arguments fail because they exaggerate the importance of these sorts of temporal scarcity, as well as the extent to which they would be absent from an immortal’s life. For instance, it is possible to be motivated to do things even without there being deadlines on those activities and, even if it wasn’t, immortal life would still contain plenty deadline-like forms of temporal scarcity.

Chapter 4 will then focus on problems immortal beings might face with reference to the *significance or impact* of their actions, the second component of a fully meaningful life. Here I will first consider whether truly significant achievements must involve some degree of virtue, challenge, or irreplaceability, and whether such achievements would be accessible to immortal beings. Nevertheless, I will conclude that there is no serious issue for immortals in these cases. On the other hand, a more troubling worry is that, although immortal beings may succeed in achieving many significant things for a long time, eventually they will run out of new significant things to do and their lives will become empty for the infinite time that follows. This is a problem for meaning if we view significance as a product of impact or value produced over lifespan, because immortal beings would live so long that any previous accomplishments of theirs would eventually shrink into total insignificance no matter how great they were. However, I ultimately argue that there are reasons to doubt this is the correct way to calculate the significance of a person’s life, and so this argument too, falls flat.

Chapter 5 considers how immortality interacts with the third component of meaning: *coherence*. Here I interpret a coherent life as primarily a life that can be turned into a sufficiently comprehensible narrative or life-story. Granting this, there are several arguments the mortalist can then make to show that immortal beings cannot possess the right kind of life-stories, and hence cannot have coherent or meaningful lives. For instance, that immortal life-stories are perpetually revisable in a way that prevents us properly understanding them, that they lack a kind of closure necessary for full comprehensibility, or that life-stories must be finite to be completely grasped. In each case, I reject these conclusions: a closer look at each issue reveals that non-revisability, closure, and finitude are simply not necessary for a life-story to be considered adequately comprehensible. Hence, we have no reason to doubt that immortal lives can be coherent in the way meaningfulness requires.

Moving on, Part Three will deal with the most prominent arguments for the immortalist position that death destroys the meaningfulness of our lives or prevents them from becoming meaningful in the first place. Chapter 6, like Chapter 3, will focus on our ability to live engaged and purposeful lives, this time as mortal beings. Primarily, it will assess the charge that mortality renders our activity pointless or futile (and hence improperly ‘purposeful’) in various ways. One relevant argument holds that our efforts are pointless because they are all merely aimed at prolonging our survival to no ultimate end. However, I reject this conclusion for the straightforward reason that many efforts in our everyday lives do *not* seem to be aimed merely at self-propagation. A second argument holds that our efforts are not pointless but are futile because they are all essentially subsumed under another kind of overarching meta-project, with death then interrupts. However, I argue that this move fails because either: (a) the overarching project is completable, in which case it could be completed in theory before we die, and so it is not mortality which poses a problem but rather our present longevity, or (b) it is an inexhaustible project, in which case its value (if it has any) would presumably be produced *throughout* its course, and so death, while an interruption, could not render our efforts entirely futile.

Chapter 7, like Chapter 4, considers arguments relating to the significance or impact of our lives. One worry is that our mortality considerably constrains what we can achieve in life and thus ensures our impact will be insignificant when compared to the vast temporal and spatial dimensions of the universe. My objection to this reasoning is essentially to point out (in agreement with Landau (2011)) that our threshold for what counts as ‘significant’ needn’t be set so high that only cosmically large or long-lasting effects count. Another related worry is that our actions can only retain their value or significance while they continue to benefit humanity, but that since we are all mortal, sooner or later, humanity will disappear from the universe without a trace. Here, I point out that this argument seems to be based on a ‘presentist’ view of time, and that a ‘four-dimensionalist’ view of time, which is more compatible with modern science, disarms it completely. Granting a four-dimensionalist perspective, the value or significance of past achievements is eternally fixed, even if there came a time when humanity had died out and their positive effects were no longer perceptible.

Chapter 8, like Chapter 5, focuses on the coherence component of meaning, and arguments that death somehow makes life *absurd* and therefore incoherent and meaningless. Some of the ways death can make our lives seem absurd – e.g. by occurring for trivial reasons, destroying our capacities, or leaving us in an undignified state – I argue needn’t be seen as necessarily absurd; there are perspectives available to us from which these facts can appear to be acceptable and natural aspects of life. However, two more troubling cases of potential absurdity might be identified in the alleged facts that human beings do not *truly* grasp they are mortal and that human life contains a drastic imbalance of work and suffering relative to reward. Nevertheless, in the latter case, I provide reasons for thinking this estimation of our lives is overly pessimistic (at least in the majority of cases), and in the former case, I set out the feasibility of our developing an authentic consciousness of our mortality and hence preventing this absurdity from arising to begin with.

Chapter 9, the final chapter of this thesis and the entirety of Part Four, will consist of a summary of the arguments discussed and my conclusions about the relationship between mortality and meaning. In short, I will conclude that neither the strong mortalist or immortalist positions are correct; mortality is neither strictly necessary for nor incompatible with our leading meaningful lives. Despite this, I will admit that the inevitability of death can influence the meaningfulness of our lives to some extent, in *both* positive and negative ways; although whether the positive or negative effects outweigh the other is hard to say, and may well vary from individual to individual, and from death to death. For instance, death can act both as a motivator for us to fill our lives with purposeful activity, and as an interruption of that activity, if it arrives at an inopportune time. It can create an environment with plenty of opportunities for overcoming challenges and displaying virtues, and yet also limits the time we have to pursue such meaningful achievements. Our mortality may make our lives easier to grasp as finite narratives, and yet can also introduce absurdities into them, such as the incongruous, self-deceptive attitudes some people have towards their own demise.

In short, there are certainly many ways that our mortality can influence the meaningfulness of our lives, and shape what kind of meaning we aim for and achieve. Nevertheless, as I hope to demonstrate, it would be wrong to suggest that death should be seen as either required or disastrous for such meaningfulness altogether. Chapter 9 will also include a reflection on the further insights garnered about mortality and meaning from the preceding discussions, and outline some lessons we might put into practice in our own lives in order to minimise the harm that our deaths might cause to us, or maximise the meaningfulness our lives could have.

2. What makes a life meaningful?

“’Meaning of life’ is undoubtedly one of the best known, but most obscure phrases in the English language.”

(Trisel, 2016, p.4)

2.1 Introduction

The question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ has often been seen as philosophy’s central concern, at least by those outside of the profession.[[1]](#footnote-1) Despite this, the question seems to have only explicitly arisen at some point during the nineteenth century when philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche arrived on the scene (O’Brien, 2017). Before then, much had been written on topics such as where life came from, the best way to live, and the nature of human existence etc. – which some see as closely connected to the meaning of life – but talk of life’s ‘meaning’, using that particular terminology, appears to be a relatively modern invention.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are many plausible explanations for the emergence of this question, but the most popular ones tend to cite the secularisation of society at that time as an important cause (e.g. Landau, 1997). Whatever ‘the meaning of life’ is supposed to be, there is some consensus that having faith in a relatively complete religious picture of our world (its origins, rules, and rewards/punishments etc.) seemed to provide it. Thus, when religious belief began to fade away, the sense of meaning it rightly or wrongly gave us was also diminished. For instance, Julian Baggini writes:

“With the supernatural removed from the world-view of modernity, all meaning has been ripped out of the universe… All would agree that the ‘discovery’ that there is no God has created a crisis of meaning for human life.” (Baggini, 2005, p.10)

Despite the start of this ‘crisis’ for the general populace, however, the question of the meaning of life remained relatively untouched by professional Anglo-American philosophers for a significant period of time and it is only in the last few decades that analytic philosophers in particular have begun to pay serious attention to the subject. Again, many possible suggestions have been made to explain this strange discrepancy – professional philosophy essentially ignoring what is usually seen by lay-people as *the* most important and acutely *philosophical* question – and the truth is likely found in a mixture of these factors.

First, some philosophers may have thought the notion of life having a meaning at all was merely an artefact of the now lost religious worldview; whatever meaning was, without God and religion, life could have no meaning, and so further discussion would be pointless.[[3]](#footnote-3) Second, some philosophers may have believed that talk of ‘life’s meaning’ itself was incoherent or confused. This may be because they believed that the only kind of meaning was *linguistic* meaning (i.e. the meanings of words), and hence to speak of life’s meaning, rather than the meaning of the *word* ‘life’, was to make a category error. Alternatively, it may simply have been because they thought that the notion of life’s meaning was poorly formed from the start – not actually picking out any single concept with real consistency (Seachris, 2012-3, p.1). Finally, it may be that some philosophers accepted the question as legitimate and worth pursuing, but felt that the appropriate method for doing so was through, say, art or poetry, rather than rigorous, analytic philosophy (Benatar, 2004, p.2).

It is also possible that the increased attention philosophers are now paying to the question of life’s meaning is a consequence of the ‘crisis of meaning’ getting *worse*. Iddo Landau (1997), for instance, describes how the initial blow caused by the loss of religion may have been softened by an increasing faith in scientific methodology and the total understanding and mastery of the world it seemed to then promise. However, Landau reports that, in more recent times, we have learnt to treat science more tentatively, sceptically, and to have greater doubts about its capacity to fully explain our universe (p.265). Thus, the temporary sense of meaning (or expectation that it would soon arrive) which science initially offered is beginning to evaporate for some.

On top of this, Landau notes how certain features and trends in modern society might exacerbate feelings of meaningless. For instance, society seems to be moving and changing much faster than it used to, instilling a feeling of incomprehension, unease, and arbitrariness into our world (p.265). Moreover, the primary aim of our societies now appears to be the pursuit of happiness (or perhaps, more cynically, *money*), which might strike us as too insignificant or frivolous a goal to render our struggles meaningful (p.266). Additionally, one might also point at the increasing invasion of consumer capitalism and social media into our private spaces, encouraging us more and more to *perform* our lives for the sake of others’ approval, rather than to *live* them with any degree of authenticity.

Regardless of exactly how the question has come about though, it is now undeniable that life’s meaning is a hot topic. Every year sees a horde of new popular, self-help style books released promising readers the information they need to live a meaningful life,[[4]](#footnote-4) and professional philosophy is not far behind, with the last decade or two seeing the publication of a large number of introductions and collections on the subject[[5]](#footnote-5) and several new journal articles every few months. Interestingly however, the majority of philosophers who choose to write on life’s meaning do not typically attempt to answer the traditional question ‘What is the meaning of life?’, but rather the differently-worded question: ‘What makes an individual’s life meaningful?’[[6]](#footnote-6) These two questions are sometimes referred to as the meaning *of* life question and the meaning *in* life question,[[7]](#footnote-7) but the reality of how they are actually related is a little murky. Is the latter merely an attempt at rewording the former with added clarity or specificity, or is it a wholly new and distinct question? Can the latter be discussed independently of the former, or will the answers inevitably be connected?

To make things clearer, it may be helpful to begin with the traditional question and make small changes to it in turn until it resembles the new question. That way we will have a better idea of the distinctions and connections between the two. Let’s call the traditional question T and the new question, which we will attempt to arrive at, N:

T: What is the meaning of life?

N: What makes an individual’s life meaningful?

At first glance, T seems to be talking about a collective subject – all human life – and assuming that this subject has a particular property we might call ‘a meaning’. T is not interested in finding out what the general criteria are for something to have ‘a meaning’, rather it seems to be requesting what actually fulfils this criteria with regard to humanity as a whole. In other words, T is a request for the fact or feature of the world that makes it true that all human life does actually have a meaning, and the answer to this question will thus presumably be *the meaning of life*. Now, we can alter T in a small way to go from ‘What is the meaning of life?’ to a new question, T1:

T1: What is the meaning of X’s life?

T1 is still talking about meaning but asking about X’s life rather than life in general, where ‘X’ could be me, you, or any particular identified person. We can therefore clearly see that T1 is asking the same kind of question as T, and using the same terminology, but is simply asking it about a different subject; instead of requesting what presently gives *all human life* a meaning, T1 asks what gives *X’s* life a meaning. Now, some theorists might believe that the answers to T and T1 will be identical, such that whatever gives a particular person’s life a meaning will simply be whatever gives *all* life a meaning.[[8]](#footnote-8) In such case, the meaning of X’s life would merely be *the* meaning of life – the same meaning that anyone and everyone’s life has. However, it is also possible to imagine T and T1 receiving distinct answers, such that there is a meaning for *all* life, but also an entirely different meaning for *my* life, or *your* life, for instance. Therefore, while T1’s focus is narrowed to an individual person, and T’s is widened to include all of humanity, it is not yet clear whether they can or must receive different answers.

The next alteration we can make to T1 (‘What is the meaning of X’s Life?’) to take it closer to N is to change the terminology being used, since N asks about ‘meaningfulness’ rather than ‘meaning’. Taking this into account, we can set out another question, T2:

T2: What makes X’s life meaningful?

Again, X here picks out any particular identified person. However, whereas T1 asks what makes it true that X’s life has ‘a meaning’, T2 asks what makes it true that X’s life has the property of ‘meaningfulness’. I believe these questions are not identical, though the distinction between them is often implicitly rejected. In other words, many contemporary theorists appear to assume that a life ‘being meaningful’ and ‘having a meaning’ are simply two ways of talking about precisely the same thing, such that, saying a life has a meaning is essentially the same as saying it is meaningful and vice versa. In this case, it would be an analytic truth that the meaning of X’s life is not just what gives it a meaning, but also something that necessarily makes it *meaningful*. Moreover, if one thinks that the meaning of X’s life is determined by the meaning of *all* life, then it would also be the meaning of all life which would make any individual person’s life meaningful.

I think treating having-a-meaning and meaningfulness as synonyms is not unreasonable given how similar the two terms sound,[[9]](#footnote-9) but it is wrong and the distinction between the two properties can be demonstrated when we examine some example cases. For instance, consider the devoted individual who spent his life alone and did nothing other than care for his pet hamster. Intuitively, it would seem wrong to describe this life as being ‘meaningful’, in fact, we might even want to call it ‘meaning*less*’, and yet I think it would be a mistake to claim this life did not have ‘a meaning’; we can easily identify the meaning of the life – it was caring for the hamster. Caring for the hamster gave the man’s life *a* meaning, even if it was not enough to make it *meaningful*.[[10]](#footnote-10) On the other hand, we can also imagine a life which seems incredibly meaningful – chock full of loving family and friends, engaging projects, and significant achievements – and yet doesn’t seem to possess any single easily identifiable thing we could discern as its ‘meaning’.

Having-a-meaning and meaningfulness can be seen to come apart in other ways too. For instance, most writers acknowledge that meaningfulness is a property that a person’s life can have by degree; a life can be a *little bit* meaningful or *very* meaningful, and one life can be *more* meaningful than another.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, meaning-having seems to be binary; either your life has a meaning, or it doesn’t. Additionally, as Joshua Seachris notes (2009, p.22), the question of a life’s meaningfulness seems to be a ‘value-laden’ one, and so describing what made a person’s life meaningful is to describe what gave it a certain variety of *goodness* or *desirability*. On the other hand, he suggests the question of what specific meaning a life has appears to be more about *understanding* the life in a rather value-neutral sense. For instance, unlike T2, T1 could be read as a request for something like a piece of information or explanation which could render the life intelligible in some way, but not necessarily desirable (e.g. an account of where life came from, what it involved, or what it resulted in). Thus, while it is likely that the concepts of meaningfulness and having-a-meaning are not entirely unrelated, and possible that the questions of what gives X’s life *a* meaning and what makes X’s life meaningful might sometimes receive the same answer, we have reason to think that these queries (T1 and T2) are not identical.

Finally, there is only one more adjustment we need to make to T2 (‘What makes X’s life meaningful?’) to turn it into the question contemporary theorists are interested in answering, N:

N: What makes any individual’s life meaningful?’

To change T2 into N is essentially to change the kind of question being asked from one about what fulfils the criteria for meaningfulness for a named individual, to what those criteria for meaningfulness actually are. Writers who task themselves to answering N are thus trying to provide an account of what generalisable requirements there are for *any* human life to count as meaningful overall – for instance, that one achieves great things, or is fulfilled by one’s work – rather than pointing out what features of particular individuals’ lives actually satisfy those requirements. The answer to N is thus a condition, or set of conditions, that one must fulfil in order to obtain a meaningful life, whereas the answers to T, T1, and T2, would be the things themselves that fulfil some set of conditions for some particular subject. However, as I have discussed in the last few paragraphs, whether the conditions which must be fulfilled by the answers to T, T1, and T2 are the same as the conditions that themselves answer N has not been conclusively determined.

For instance, if one believes that the meaning of an individual’s life is simply the meaning of all life, and that whatever gives a life a meaning also makes it meaningful, then it seems like whether an individual’s life is meaningful or not will simply be determined by whether *life,* as a whole, has a meaning. In other words, the answer to N (‘What makes an individual’s life meaningful?’) will simply be: ‘whether or not there is a meaning to life in general’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Nevertheless, a common assumption amongst the majority of contemporary philosophers seems to be, as John Cottingham suggests, that one’s ability to secure a meaningful life as an individual is held largely distinct from whatever the answer to the ‘grand’ questions about the meaning *of* life (aka. T) might turn out to be (2003, p.19).[[13]](#footnote-13) If this is the case – that the question of whether one’s life is meaningful is settled independently from the question of whether human life altogether has a meaning – then it must be the case either that the meaning of *my* life is not necessarily the same as the meaning of *all* life, or that having-a-meaning and meaningfulness are distinct, or both.

As it happens, I think the answer is both, but I don’t need to argue this here. To provide the space my project needs, the only thing we need to grant, which I have given several good reasons for granting, is that questions of meaningfulness are distinct from questions of meaning. That way it will be legitimate to theorise about what adds or subtracts meaningfulness from an individual’s life, without settling or referring to any questions about the meaning of that life or of *all* life. This space is important for my project because it is specifically an examination of the *meaningfulness* of our lives and its relationship with mortality which I am interested in here, and I do not wish to be side-tracked into first discussing grand questions about the universe or life as a whole. Thus, I will not attempt to establish anything about the nature of the meaning of life in this chapter because, again, my aims are specifically to discuss the effect mortality has on the *meaningfulness* of our lives and not necessarily to examine whether death in general has any impact on thebigmeaning *of* lifequestion.[[14]](#footnote-14)

To reiterate, it is possible that this question about the meaningfulness of a person’s life is related in some way to the questions specifically about the *meaning* of all human life but, for now at least, I will put these other concerns aside. Granting the above, in order to carry out my evaluations of the mortalist and immortalist arguments correctly, I will not need to say anything about whether life in general has a meaning or what that itself means. Nevertheless, I will first need to settle on at least a general characterisation of what *meaningfulness* is and what factor or factors determine a life’s meaningfulness. In other words, I will need to find a plausible answer to N – ‘What makes any individual’s life meaningful?’ – and that is what the rest of this chapter will do. Section 2.2 will contain an overview of some existing theories of meaningfulness and their respective weaknesses. Section 2.3 will contain my own sketched theory to be carried through the rest of this thesis, drawing on the lessons learnt from 2.2.

2.2 Existing accounts of meaningfulness

As discussed in the previous section, most contemporary philosophers writing on this topic task themselves to answer the question ‘What makes a person’s life meaningful?’. This question has attracted attention because of the persistent lack of clarity that seems to pervade talk of a life’s meaningfulness. Most ordinary people seem to have somewhat reliable intuitions about which lives are meaningful, how much, and for what sort of reasons (e.g. Einstein’s life was meaningful, quite considerably, and because of his scientific discoveries), and yet the concept of meaningfulness itself seems tricky to pin down in any precise way. In light of this, many writers have attempted to identify some specific principle or set of criteria which allegedly determines the meaningfulness of a person’s life. In other words, the factor or group of factors which make a life meaningful. Thaddeus Metz explains that finding such a theory, which successfully accounts for our perceptions of meaningfulness in the lives of others and ourselves, would be “intellectually satisfying, akin to discovering that the rain, the ocean, and the liquid that runs from the tap and one’s eyes are all H20” (2013, p.7).

The theories which have been offered so far – which I will call ‘m-theories’ for short – come in many shapes and sizes. In fact, having digested even a handful, one cannot fail to notice just how little agreement there seems to be, even with regard to the basic nature of what meaningfulness *is*. Most writers treat meaningfulness in line with Susan Wolf’s initial characterisation – as “a significant way in which life can be good… and which is neither subsumable under nor reducible to either happiness or morality” (2010, p.8) – but beyond that there is almost no consensus.

To give my overview of these m-theories some structure, it will be useful to categorise them. The most common classificatory strategy here is to split them into four broad groups: supernaturalist theories, which hold that some non-natural being/force/property is required for life to be meaningful; subjectivist m-theories, which claim that an individual’s subjective beliefs or attitudes are alone what determine their life’s meaningfulness; objectivist m-theories, which claim that something beyond one’s own mental states determines the meaningfulness of one’s life; and ‘hybrid’ m-theories, which combine both subjective and objective requirements. Typically, the last three groups, subjectivism, objectivism, and hybrid-accounts are seen as naturalist theories (i.e. in contrast to supernaturalism, they hold that a life can be rendered meaningful by purely natural things).

Supernaturalist accounts tend to revolve around the unique properties of a supernatural or God-like being. For instance, one traditional theory is that our lives are made meaningful because God created each of us with some plan or goal in mind. A recent defence of which can be found in Jacob Affolter’s (2007) *Human Nature* *as God’s Purpose*. Other theorists, such as Cottingham (2003) and William Lane Craig (1994), have suggested that it is God’s ability to ground objective moral truths which renders our lives meaningful. Whilst Robert Nozick has outlined (but perhaps does not fully support) a theory wherein God is the sole wellspring of meaningfulness because God alone is infinite and incapable of being placed within a context where its meaningfulness can be questioned (2001, p.600-6).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Subjectivist m-theories, such as Richard Taylor’s simple fulfilment theory (1970) and Harry Frankfurt’s loving/caring theory (1988) typically hold that an activity causing a certain attitude or feeling in the individual (e.g. fulfilment or love) is enough to render it meaningful. However, due to certain troubling counter-examples which I will discuss shortly, there has been a shift in the debate to favour hybrid m-theories. Examples of which include Wolf’s well-known proposal that meaningfulness is generated through subjective attraction to only objectively valuable activities (2010),[[16]](#footnote-16) and Steven Luper’s ‘achievementist’ theory, where meaningfulness is a measure of how many of our subjectively adopted aims we objectively achieve (2014).

Pure objectivist m-theories are also increasingly common, for instance: accounts that revolve around purposeful activity, such as Neil Levy’s (2005) or Gwen Bradford’s (2015) theory that meaningfulness comes from pursuing ‘open-ended’ projects; ‘consequentialist’ accounts, such as Ben Bramble’s (2015) or Aaron Smuts’ (2013), which say that producing valuable results makes one’s life meaningful; and narrativist accounts, such as John Fischer’s (2005, 2009) and Antti Kauppinen’s (2012), which claim that the meaningfulness of one’s life is determined by the objective quality of one’s ‘life-story’. There are also harder to categorise objectivist m-theories which seem to revolve around the claim that engaging in a certain *kind* of activity is necessary and sufficient for one’s life to be meaningful, such as promoting and connecting to objects of intrinsic value understood as ‘organic unity’ (Nozick, 2001) or directing one’s rationality towards the ‘fundamental conditions of human life’ (Metz, 2013).

The list above covers only a fraction of the literature but demonstrates the diversity of the existing m-theories and the concepts of meaningfulness they employ. Despite this diversity, however, there is a lot that is correct or insightful within most of these theories; yet, I believe almost all of them fail when taken as stand-alone accounts of meaningfulness. Starting with the supernaturalist theories, we can reject Nozick’s offering as being more than a little confused; Nozick’s inspiring thought seems to be that meaningfulness comes from transcending the boundaries of our lives and connecting to or serving something greater than ourselves. However, to get meaningfulness from connecting to this greater thing, Nozick reasons, that thing also has to be meaningful, which means it also has to connect to something greater itself. Nozick then proposes that the only thing which might avoid the infinite regress of greater and greater things, which is threatened here, is something whose meaningfulness cannot be questioned. For Nozick, this entity appears to be God, which he calls the ‘Ein Sof’, and defines as the totality of all things in all possible worlds (2001, p.601). The idea is apparently that only the Ein Sof can ground the meaningfulness in the universe, because it is impossible to ‘step back’ from and see as meaningless in a larger context, simply because there can be no larger context.

As noted above, there seems to be something confused about Nozick’s proposal. First of all, it is unclear how ‘the totality of all things in all possible worlds’ could *be* God, as God is understood in any traditional sense. The Ein Sof, as Nozick has defined it, does not seem to be a being at all, let alone something with a will or a personality; rather, it seems to be merely the universe’s largest conglomeration of *stuff*, both real and possible. How to connect or serve this thing then, so as to share in its meaningfulness, is far from obvious. Moreover, it is not clear why the Ein Sof should necessarily be seen as capable of grounding meaningfulness at all, even if we could connect to it. It is true that it cannot be portrayed as meaningless in the way normal things can – i.e. by casting it against a larger context and revealing that it connects to nothing greater. However, it equally cannot be portrayed as meaningful in the normal way: as connecting to something greater. Nozick has no justification for describing it as meaningful-in-itself rather than meaningless-in-itself, then. In fact, because there is nothing greater for it to either connect to or fail to connect to, it seems like the more reasonable reading would simply be to claim that the Ein Sof, if it even makes sense to talk of such an entity, is neither meaningless nor meaningful, and is thus of doubtful use with regard to grounding the meaningfulness in our own lives.

Next, it seems that m-theories like Cottingham’s (2003) and Craig’s (1994) which revolve around God’s ability to ground objective morality are susceptible to the classic Euthyphro objection. Simply put, if God’s ability to ground objective morality is questionable, then so is anything that supposedly rests on it, such as his ability to make our lives meaningful. A Euthyphro-style problem can also be seen as afflicting supernaturalist theories which focus on God creating us for a specific purpose (Kauppinen, 2012, p355). In short, either God created us with a purpose *because* that purpose was already meaningful (in which case God is not strictly necessary for things to be meaningful), or our God-given purpose is meaningful merely *because* it is God-given. However, this latter option doesn’t seem particularly plausible when we reflect on the possible purposes God might have chosen for us. For instance, as Nozick points out, if our God-given purpose in life was to be food for aliens, none of us would perceive that existence as very meaningful at all (2001, p.586). So merely being assigned a purpose by God does not seem sufficient to generate meaningfulness for one’s life.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Granting these points, many of the most obvious supernatural theories don’t seem to work. However, there are also problems faced by the naturalist m-theories as well. Most common are the unacceptable false-positives and/or negatives we are often left with if we accept their criteria for meaningfulness. For instance, in the case of the pure subjectivist conceptions, it seems that we could potentially have feelings such as fulfilment or love in response to something entirely trivial, futile, or pointless, but such activities do not intuitively seem like good sources of meaningfulness.[[18]](#footnote-18) According to such theories, our lives could even end up meaningful simply because we’d taken a particular drug (Brogaard and Smith, 2005, p445) or been plugged into Nozick’s experience machine (1974, p.42), which are both absurd suggestions. Wolf’s (2010) theory that meaningfulness comes from subjective attraction to objective value tries to avoid these counter-examples, since these activities and lives would presumably hold little objective value. Yet in making subjective attraction a *requirement* for meaningfulness, she opens herself up to a new set of objections: for example, we can see that a life like Martin Luther King’s still appears to have some substantial meaning, even if it turned out that he was chronically stressed or hated his work.

Counter-examples centring on pointless or trivial activities can also be aimed at m-theories which claim meaningfulness is generated through pursuing or accomplishing self-chosen projects, like Levy (2005), Bradford (2015), or Luper’s (2014); for instance, I could set myself the lifelong task of humiliating myself as much as possible in front of strangers but, again, that would not intuitively make my life very meaningful. Alternatively, it doesn’t seem like causing significant or valuable results is alone sufficient for meaningfulness either; against consequentialist m-theories like those of Smuts (2013) or Bramble (2015), we can see that someone born with unique DNA and unwillingly tortured for medical data could not have an *ideally* meaningful life, no matter how useful the results were.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such theories also fail to properly distinguish between someone who produces a valuable result through decades of deliberate hard work, and someone who produced equivalent value by accident. Yet I assume most people’s intuitions would indicate that the former individual had the more meaningful life, all things considered.

It is somewhat harder to dismiss more subtle m-theories like those of Fischer (2005, 2009) – ‘living a life with the right kind of narrative structure’ – Metz (2013) – ‘directing one’s rationality to the fundamental conditions of existence’ – and Nozick (2001) – ‘promoting organic unity’ – for which counter-examples are hard to find. Nevertheless, there are still grounds on which we can criticise these theories. In particular, we can point out that the absence of obvious counter-examples may just be a consequence of these theorists’ conceptions of meaningfulness being so ambiguous and imprecise as to be almost unfalsifiable. Of course, life is complicated and it’s more than likely that finding totally precise definitions for many of our concepts might be impossible. Nevertheless, there is something suspicious about both Fischer, Nozick, and particularly Metz’s theories, which seem to have been built simply by diluting a definition of meaningfulness until it is vague enough that it can covary more or less well with our intuitions about which lives are meaningful, but may well only be successful in this regard because its vagueness serves to cover up inadequacies that would be clear if the terms were rendered more precise.

Imagine the concept of meaningfulness as a completely encased machine into which the facts of someone’s life are inputted, and out of which comes an overall meaningfulness-grade (analogous to the thus-far opaque procedure through which we ourselves end up with certain ‘gut feelings’ about how meaningful particular lives are). These theorists seem to have built machines which might successfully and consistently produce the same grades from the same inputs as the *official* meaningfulness machine. Nevertheless, why should we believe that their machines work as claimed? Since they haven’t shown us what’s inside them, it may be that all that lies within are Fischer, Nozick, and Metz themselves, deciding on an ad-hoc basis what counts as, respectively, the ‘right narrative structure’, ‘organic unity’, or the ‘fundamental conditions of existence’, so that the meaningfulness-grades always come out correctly. For their theories to be compelling, the inner-workings of their meaningfulness-machines must be laid bare, so we can see that they work as promised. In other words, these theorists cannot just present us with a vague definition of meaningfulness that appears to be extensionally adequate (open to no counter-examples), their definition must be clear and precise enough so that we know this success has been achieved without anyone’s thumb on the scale.

Kauppinen’s (2012) own narrativist theory does much better in this regard. His account states that a person’s life is meaningful to the extent its individual chapters (temporal segments of the life) are devoted to successfully pursuing challenging and objectively valuable projects, and when those chapters are organised in such a way that they ‘cohere’ (link together causally, so that the earlier chapters pave the way for the latter ones). The meaningfulness-determining factors Kauppinen picks out (having a life-story with the above sort of content and structure) are admittedly quite complex, but he describes his criteria in good detail and so it seems unlikely that this complexity is hiding anything suspicious or vague. Moreover, it is very difficult to think of any counter-examples to Kauppinen’s theory that would bear either false positives or false negatives. For any m-theory which purports to identify meaningfulness as a single (albeit complex) property, I think this one does the best.

Nevertheless, I don’t think Kauppinen has succeeded in providing a completely compelling explanation of what makes a life meaningful. My main objection here is simply that, although Kauppinen’s theory does appear to account for our intuitions about what would make a life meaningful rather well (e.g. it would seem less meaningful if our life’s chapters were disordered, or if they were aimless, or we were unsuccessful in our aims etc.), and although Kauppinen’s theory is clear and precise in the way it does this, he seems to have built it in in a rather ad-hoc way – adding criteria and rules merely because they combine to produce the correct results, rather than because we have any independent reason for thinking they actually *belong* in our best theory of meaningfulness. Thus, even if his theory ends up being extensionally or referentially adequate, we have insufficient reason to accept it actually captures the true *nature* or *meaning* of meaningfulness; i.e. we have insufficient reason to accept it is *sense* adequate.

To return to the machine analogy, Kauppinen, like some of the theorists above, seems to have built a machine which successfully and consistently produces the same grades from the same inputs as the *official* meaningfulness machine. Additionally, unlike Fischer, Nozick, and Metz’s machines, the inner-workings of Kauppinen’s machine are not obscured, but open for all to see. Yet, why should we believe that Kauppinen has successfully replicated the official meaningfulness machine *exactly* and not just built a machine which does the same job but works in a very different way? To convince us that his machine is indeed an exact replica, we need some additional explanation as to why it is likely the official meaning machine (which is still completely enclosed) has the same inner-workings as his. In other words, we need some additional explanation as to why the criteria Kauppinen has selected are the same criteria our own intuitions about meaningfulness actually turn on. Otherwise, we would have insufficient reason to accept that what he is describing is meaningfulness *itself*, rather than some other artificially constructed concept which (quite deliberately) happens to have the same extension as meaningfulness but may ultimately have a different *sense*.

As it happens, Kauppinen does attempt to provide such an explanation, but I don’t think what he says is ultimately compelling. Specifically, in addition to his criteria for what makes a life meaningful, Kauppinen also gives a broad characterisation of what he thinks the property of meaningfulness actually *is* – i.e. the sense or meaning of ‘meaningfulness’ –and tries to link his criteria to this characterisation.[[20]](#footnote-20) Meaningfulness, Kauppinen argues, is the quality of a life whereby certain attitudes such as fulfilment or pride would be *fitting*, and feelings like fulfilment or pride would be fitting to the extent it would be appropriate or correct for someone to feel them, regardless of whether they actually *do* feel them (p.353).[[21]](#footnote-21)

Thus, if it would be appropriate for someone like Martin Luther King to feel proud or fulfilled by his life, then his life would have the property of meaningfulness, regardless of his actual attitudes, while one’s life would be meaning*less* if it would be entirely inappropriate to feel either proud or fulfilled by it. Kauppinen then links this characterisation of meaningfulness to his specific narrativist criteria for what makes a life meaningful by pointing out that the kinds of attitudes he’s discussing (chiefly, fulfilment and pride) are, in a sense, *narrative* emotions (p.357). In other words, the fitting fulfilment or pride relevant to meaningfulness is only appropriate in response to a situation wherein one can see oneself as the protagonist of a certain kind of story – i.e. a life-story of challenging and valuable successes coherently linked together.

Kauppinen has thus provided some justification as to why the narrative criteria of his theory should be seen as the criteria we genuinely employ when judging meaningfulness: because the meaning of meaningfulness just *is* the property of one’s life or ‘life-story’ being a certain admirable, fulfilment-worthy way, and his narrative criteria allegedly specify this property. According to Kauppinen, apt pride and fulfilment are precisely what the official meaningfulness-machine is supposed to be measuring. Therefore, we have now been provided some additional justification for thinking that the workings of Kauppinen’s meaningfulness-machine would also be found if we opened the case of the official meaningfulness-machine, beyond the fact that they produce the same evaluations.

Nevertheless, I don’t think this reason is a particularly strong one, primarily because I don’t think Kauppinen’s characterisation of the meaning of meaningfulness is the best we can find (i.e. I don’t think apt pride and fulfilment *is* what the official meaningfulness machine is measuring). The problem is, while I am certain there is some value in having a life which one can rightly feel fulfilled by and proud of, and such a life will also be meaningful much of the time, I see little reason to identify this value *as* meaningfulness. For starters, even if it transpires that meaningful lives always seem to be fitting sources of pride and fulfilment and vice-versa, the fact is that the term ‘meaningfulness’ never means anything close to ‘fittingness of pride/fulfilment’ in our everyday language. How have we come to refer to this unusual concept as ‘meaningfulness’ then? This puzzle should give us an initial reason to doubt Kauppinen’s characterisation.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Moreover, it strikes me that when a person desires a more meaningful life, the object of their desire might *result* in reasons for fulfilment or pride, but the actual object of the person’s desire – i.e. the true sense of the term ‘meaningful – just *feels* distinct from those things which would merely accompany it. Another way of putting it is that the person who has done nothing to be fulfilled by or proud of might *also* complain that their life is meaningless, but this appears to be saying something different or over-and-above the admission that they’ve merely wasted their time. Thus, while Kauppinen’s characterisation of meaningfulness might align well with the precise criteria of his theory, the whole move is ultimately unconvincing for the basic reason that his understanding of meaningfulness fails to *resonate* fully with our intuitions about what meaningfulness actually *is*, or the meaning of the term in ordinary language.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the end, Kauppinen ends up not having moved far from his earlier position; he has identified and defined a complex property which covaries more or less well with our intuitions about which lives are meaningful, but he has not given us a compelling reason to accept his theory beyond the fact that it successfully does this. In other words, his theory may be extensionally adequate, but whether it is sense adequate is still unclear. If another theory can provide a better account of both the extension and sense of ‘meaningfulness’, as I believe my own can, we should prefer that theory.[[24]](#footnote-24)

This list of m-theories and counter arguments could go on, but I hope I have now given an insight into the state of the debate as well as the kinds of problems that afflict most existing theories of meaningfulness. Drawing on the preceding arguments I have presented, it is now possible to make some suggestions about what a strong m-theory should do. For instance:

1. It should describe, coherently and relatively precisely, the factors or criteria that determine how meaningful a life is.
2. It should be extensionally adequate, in that its evaluations of meaningfulness should align with our strongest and most common intuitions about whose lives are meaningful, how much, and for what reasons.
3. It should be sense adequate, in that it should provide some satisfactory explanation as to why the factor or factors it includes *deserve* to be seen as legitimate components of meaningfulness itself, beyond the fact that they are necessary to satisfy B (and thus why the final theory is more than just a definition of some artificial concept that happens to merely covary with meaningfulness).

A summary table of the m-theories I have discussed and the objections I have made (cross-referenced with which of the above desiderata I consider them to be in violation of), can be found below (fig. 1). In the next section I will outline a plausible m-theory which I think satisfies the above desiderata

Fig 1.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **M-Theorists** | **What Makes Life Meaningful?** | **Objection** |
| Nozick (supernaturalist) | Connecting with totality of all things | (A) Confused |
| Cottingham, Craig | Living according to moral laws | (A) Euthyphro objection |
| Affolter | Being created by God for a reason | (B) Trivial purpose/reason |
| Taylor, Frankfurt | Fulfilment/love etc. | (B) Trivial objects of feelings |
| Luper | Completing self-determined goals | (B) Trivial goals |
| Bradford, Levy | Pursuing open-ended projects | (B) Trivial projects |
| Wolf | Attraction to objective value | (B) Bored/stressed heroes |
| Bramble, Smuts | Producing a valuable impact | (B) Accidental/unwilling producers of valuable results |
| Fischer | Life-story with a certain structure | (A) Too vague |
| Nozick (naturalist) | Promote organic unity | (A) Too vague |
| Metz | Directing one’s rationality towards the fundamental conditions of human existence | (A) Too vague |
| Kauppinen | Having a coherent life-story | (C) Artificial/poorly justified |

2.3 An amalgam theory of meaningfulness

In light of the last section’s discussion, it may now seem as though there could be no straightforward answer to the question of what makes a life meaningful. Any m-theory which attempted to give a simple definition (e.g. God’s purpose, what we love, the value we produce etc.) seemed vulnerable to problematic counter-examples, but theories which tried to avoid such counter-examples were themselves unconvincing on grounds of vagueness or artificiality. The apparent failure of all attempts to analyse the concept of meaningfulness this way has led some writers to doubt, as Wolf puts it, “whether there is a single cleanly definable concept that is being invoked in all the contexts in which talk of meaningful (and meaningless) lives may naturally take place” (2010, p.12). Is it possible that, when we talk about a life’s meaningfulness, there is in fact no one thing we are always referring to?

Indeed, this is what some theorists had apparently thought about ‘the meaning of life’ all along (as I earlier noted), and what theorists like Timothy Mawson have argued for directly. Mawson (2010) asserts that there simply is no single concept that can be identified as ‘meaning’. Rather, what we think of as ‘the meaning of life’ is actually just a conglomeration of different ideas bundled together which are unified by no overarching concept, theme, or rule other than the fact that they are, in fact, what some people have in mind when they think about this topic (p.25). According to this analysis, when a person asks about the meaning of their life, they are actually asking one or many of a host of questions, which may or may not overlap, such as, ‘is my life worth living?’, ‘does my life have a purpose?’, and ‘is my life valuable?’ etc. Mawson concludes that it is no wonder we can never find any ‘pithy formula’ that can satisfyingly answer ‘the’ big question, because it is actually many questions all asked at once (p.21).

Seachris (2017) refers to theories such as Mawson’s as ‘amalgam theses’ of life’s meaning, and traces such a notion back as far as R. W. Hepburn’s (1966) *Questions about the Meaning of Life*. According to Seachris, such an analysis entails that the traditional ‘meaning of life’ question is merely “a largely ill-conceived place-holder for a cluster of related requests, and thus, not really a single question at all” (2017). Essentially, there is no such thing as meaning (in this context), and thus no point trying to analyse what meaning *is*. Rather, we should re-aim our efforts, distinguish some of the sub-questions that have been erroneously bundled together under the label ‘what is the meaning of life?’, and try to answer them instead.

If something like Mawson’s amalgam thesis were true for the property of meaningfulness as well, that would explain our persistent failure to find any simple unproblematic m-theory. Moreover, it may seem to suggest that such a project was hopeless from the start. Meaningfulness is no single thing in particular; it is just a list of different concepts – perhaps related, perhaps not – which we have collectively mixed up and called ‘meaningfulness’. No wonder we could find no simple, H2O-like definition which succeeded in matching all our intuitions about which lives were meaningful, since our intuitions were not actually following any clear rule or tracking any single variable in the first place.

I do think there is some truth in Mawson’s amalgam theory of meaningfulness; our intuitions here do appear to be too complex to be caused by any single factor – that that much seems clear from the diversity of seemingly relevant m-theories which have been proposed, combined with their individual inadequacy taken alone. Nevertheless, I think we can reject some of the more pessimistic consequences of such a thesis. Specifically, while I agree that meaningfulness may be comprised of more than one concept, I disagree that this list of component concepts is populated by something as fluid and arbitrary as ‘whatever people happen to have in mind when they talk about meaningfulness’. In fact, I think we can pick out at least three factors that seem to *belong* quite stably as varieties or component concepts of meaningfulness more than any others, both for consistently aligning with our intuitions about how meaningful certain lives are and what meaningfulness *is*, and for aligning with more straightforward definitions of the word ‘meaningful’ as it is used in our everyday language. Those three factors are: I. purposefulness, II. significance, and III. coherence.[[25]](#footnote-25) When we talk about the meaningfulness of a life, I contend, we are typically aiming to describe it as having one or more (or all) of these qualities. I will attempt to justify my inclusion of each of them in turn.

I. Purposefulness

Purposefulness seems to be a fairly obvious choice for inclusion within my amalgam theory of meaningfulness. In general, lives with a certain kind of purposefulness appear to be more meaningful than lives characterised by purpose*less*ness. Consider one of the trends I discussed in 2.1 as playing a key causal role in the emergence of the topic of life’s meaning: the secularisation of society. Here, one of the crucial differences we can see between the worldviews of the theist and the atheist is the presence or absence of a cosmic *goal* which humanity is contributing to. For those with traditional religious faith, humanity may have well been created by God to play a role in some grand plan. However, for those who believe humanity is merely the product of the Big Bang and millions of years of evolution, our existence will be accidental and entirely lacking in prior purpose. The growing meaninglessness society apparently felt when reflecting on this loss of purpose is evidence for my claim that purposefulness is one of three primary component concepts of life’s meaningfulness.

Moreover, while it is true that many atheists would deny our lives are meaningless just because we were not *created* with a purpose to work towards, the next step in their argument is typically to point out that we can give our lives a purpose ourselves. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre (1945) uses the famous example of the paper knife as something with a purpose built into its very essence. However, things (including human beings) can have purposes which were not builtinto them but were given to them or adopted by them long after they were created. Julian Baggini, for example, points out that a sharp piece of flint can also be given the purpose of cutting paper, even though that purpose is not contained within its essence as it is for the paper knife (2005, p.11). The existential message often repeated is that we can make our lives meaningful by choosing and pursuing our own purposes, and while this may be primarily aimed at reassuring atheists, it also serves to emphasise the conceptual identity, which I am arguing for, between purposefulness and one sense or aspect of meaningfulness.

The idea that meaning or meaningfulness is related to purposes is also supported by many philosophers[[26]](#footnote-26) including some of the theorists discussed already; both supernaturalist m-theories like Affolter’s (2007) and naturalist m-theories like Bradford (2015) and Levy’s (2005) revolve around the idea of life gaining its meaning through either contributing to one’s God-given purpose or pursuing an open-ended purpose of one’s own. This is an accurate insight, even if it is not the end of the story with regard to what factors are relevant to meaningfulness. Ceteris paribus, a life seems *less* meaningful if it is completely aimless. On the other hand, we can see that individuals whose lives strike us as archetypically meaningful were often deeply committed to some purpose over a long period of time, such as Gandhi’s drawn-out fight for India’s independence.

Finally, we have some good justification for thinking that purposefulness is indeed a legitimate component concept of life’s meaningfulness; not just because it aligns with our intuitions but because ‘purposeful’ is often quite clearly what ‘meaningful’ *means* in certain everyday contexts. For instance, if someone said, ‘Did you mean to smash that glass?’ It is fairly transparent that they are inquiring about the intentions of the person who smashed the glass. In other words, if they did indeed *mean* to smash the glass, then glass-smashing was the *purpose* or ‘meaning’ of their action. Consequently, if a person said their action had no meaning– i.e. it was *meaningless* – then one reasonable way of interpreting them would be as saying that their action was unintentional or *purposeless*.[[27]](#footnote-27) Therefore, we can see very transparently just *how* purposefulness came to be an aspect of our shared amalgam concept of a meaningful life.

Even Wolf in her hybrid theory of meaningfulness includes the requirement that, alongside being subjectively attracted to something of objective value, one must also ‘actively engage’ with that object (e.g. “create it, protect it, promote it…” etc.) in order for true meaningfulness to be generated (2010, p.9-10). Essentially, she is pointing out that just feeling a certain way about something valuable is not enough for meaningfulness by itself; some kind of purposeful activity is also important.

I am doubtful as to whether Wolf’s two additional requirements – subjective fulfilment and objective value – are necessary or correct though. I will discuss the latter in the next section on significance. As for the former, I did argue earlier that someone like Martin Luther King’s life still appears meaningful even if we imagine he were perpetually bored or stressed out with (and not ‘fulfilled by’) his noble purpose. However, Wolf later altered her account so that fulfilment or attraction is no longer necessary but that some kind of subjective *interest* or *engagement* with the object still is (p.110-3). Should this be included here, so that this component of meaningfulness is not merely purposefulness but *engaged* purposefulness?

I wish to leave this undecided, but here are two considerations which may suggest the answer should be no: first, is it really possible to pursue some goal purposefully *without* feeling any kind of engagement whatsoever? If not, then the addition of an engagement requirement to my theory will be redundant. Second, would it really reduce the meaningfulness of a person’s pursuit of some goal if we imagine they were somehow entirely disinterested in it? Would it reduce the meaningfulness of a person playing a role in God’s grand plan if it transpired they didn’t care at all about this part they played? If not, then it doesn’t seem like engagement deserves a place in our best theory of meaningfulness.

II. Significance

A second clear component concept of meaningfulness is significance, by which I mean to refer to the scale or magnitude of the achievements of a person’s life, how much impact they create and how much of a trace they leave behind. It is hard to deny that, generally, lives which are more significant appear more meaningful than lives which are insignificant, and support for this claim can be drawn from many places.[[28]](#footnote-28) First of all, like purposefulness, we can see some evidence for identifying significance as a facet of meaningfulness when we consider the meaning-crisis that allegedly resulted from the loss of religion. I mentioned above that one thing secularisation presumably caused were feelings that life’s purpose had been lost, but we can also assume that the newly faithless felt that life had lost some of its *significance* too. As Oswald Hanfling put it:

“It is a shock when we learn these facts about the human situation in space and time; and it was a profound shock when these ideas were first introduced… There is a connection between meaning and importance; and if the scientific picture is correct, we do not have the importance that we thought we had.” (Hanfling, 1987, p.46)

This reaction seems natural. After all, human beings were previously thought of as the beloved children of the most powerful and perfect being ever to exist, who built the entire universe just for them and placed them at the centre, who cares for them, and who has prepared everlasting rewards or punishments for them depending on the actions they perform throughout life. Yet, in the atheist/scientific worldview, human beings are just one form of life that accidentally emerged on one planet in an indifferent universe in which there is no all-powerful being to look out for them, nor to care about what way they live their lives. It’s undeniable that both ourselves and our accomplishments appear less significant from the secular perspective, but what is telling is that this loss of significance also seems to coincide with the feeling that some of the meaningfulness of our lives has been lost as well.

Of course, even without being God’s chosen people, it is still possible to compare how significant individual humans are relative to one another, and this gives us more evidence for the appropriateness of treating significance as a component of meaningfulness. Human beings who have done great things or changed the world through, for instance, art, culture, politics, or intellectual discovery, seem to have much more meaningful lives than those who achieved relatively little, all other things being equal. Alternatively, there is something indisputably meaningless about the life of someone who departs this world having left *no* mark on it whatsoever such that, had they never been born, all would be exactly the same. The connection between meaningfulness and significance is again supported by many writers,[[29]](#footnote-29) and consequentialist m-theorists such as Smuts (2013) and Bramble (2015) would certainly agree with the above evaluations. Again, their theories provide us with an accurate insight, even if their ultimate account of meaningfulness is overly narrow.

Finally, and as with purposefulness, we can see that interpreting at least one aspect of meaningfulness as significance chimes with another everyday usage of the term ‘meaningful’. For example, when a person says something like ‘penicillin was a meaningful discovery’, they are trying to convey the message that the discovery of penicillin had a large impact on the world – that it saved thousands of lives, perhaps, and dramatically changed the field of medicine – in other words, that it was *significant*. On the other hand, if one were to call a scientific discovery ‘meaningless’, one would likely be suggesting that it *wasn’t* significant, and would have no serious or lasting consequences. Thus, we have another good reason for incorporating significance within our theory; it doesn’t just align with our evaluations of meaningfulness, we also have an explanation as to *why* we sometimes call significant lives meaningful: because we call *all kinds* of significant things meaningful.

As above, however, there is an important further question regarding the concept under discussion which needs to be addressed: whether or not ‘significance’, as it is to be included in my theory, should be understood as a positive or value-neutral term. In other words, to be significant in the way relevant for meaningfulness does one’s impact on the world have to be actively *positive* or *valuable* to count? Most lives that come to mind as having great meaningfulness are typically those who contributed good to the world, like Gandhi or Florence Nightingale. However, Bradford reports that when asked to list meaningful events, people also often mention things like World War II or 9/11 (2015, p.5).

The latter of these two observations would support our identifying the relevant kind of significance here as merely a value-neutral measure of something’s magnitude or size of effect; nevertheless, that would entail that individual’s like Hitler, who were historically very important but for doing terrible things, could have incredibly meaningful lives. Some have accepted this suggestion,[[30]](#footnote-30) but many other lay people and philosophers would baulk at it. For instance, Martela (2017, p.252) and Kauppinen (2012, p.361, footnote 31) both specifically deny that Hitler could have lived a meaningful life, and others such as Bramble, Smuts, and Wolf would all likely say the same, given that their theories each involve the explicit requirement that one promote *objective value* in order to generate meaningfulness.

As it happens, I think the truth is that individuals like Hitler could have somewhat meaningful lives, but we are usually hesitant to apply this description because it sounds too much like praising them. This is a specific instantiation of a more general trend where, if a person's actions are considered morally wrong, there is a tendency to be reluctant to apply any evaluations to them which are usually a manner of praise, even if the evaluation is in fact warranted. For instance, people will rush to deny that, say, a suicide bomber’s actions were brave, and even call them 'cowardly', as a means of showing disapproval of the actions. This evaluation would clearly be incorrect though; the action was evil, but certainly not cowardly.

Given this, despite admitting that WWII was meaningful in the sense of being significant, we are generally reluctant to acknowledge that it grants any meaningfulness to the individual who was primarily responsible for it. However, I think we can stomach this conclusion if we remind ourselves that describing a life as meaningful is not necessarily to praise it, provided we understand significance in a value-neutral sense, as we appear to when considerations of praise/blame are less at stake. While there were some massive flaws in Hitler’s life, it would be wrong to deny it was meaningful, just as it would be wrong to deny, for instance, that he was a famous figure or a persuasive public speaker; like meaningfulness these are descriptive terms and are thus not inherently forms of praise.

Nevertheless, even if meaningfulness *in general* should be correctly understood as involving either positive or negative significance, this is perhaps not the right approach for my thesis. Specifically, few people would desire a meaningful life if it was meaningful for the wrong reasons, i.e. meaningful for hurting people or destroying things of value. A meaningful life is similar to a famous life in that respect: a lot of us would want to be famous, but we presumably would not want to be *infamous* for doing something humiliating or evil. Similarly, we would not desire a life that was meaningful because it was responsible for a genocide. Yet, the main motivation for my project was implicitly to examine whether either mortality or immortality could be necessary for our lives to be meaningful *in as much as that is something we desire*. It would be of little relief or use, for instance, to be told that mortal life can indeed be meaningful, but that it can’t have the kind of meaningfulness we actually want. Granting this, my aim in this chapter should perhaps not be to provide an account of what generates meaningfulness per se, but specifically what generates the sort of meaningfulness that matters to us, and *that* account, it seems fairly clear, *would* involve the requirement that one’s significance be of the valuable variety. For the rest of this thesis then, unless otherwise specified, ‘meaningfulness’ should be read as ‘the kind of meaningfulness we want for ourselves’, and ‘significance’ as ‘positive significance’.

III. Coherence

Coherence is the third and final element I think should be included in this amalgam theory of meaningfulness. All things considered, it strikes me that a person’s life seems more meaningful to the extent its structure and content are relatively familiar, ordered, and stable, and less meaningful to the extent its structure and content are alien, disordered, and chaotic. In other words, a person’s life will be perceived as more meaningful, ceteris paribus, the more comprehensible and coherent it appears to be. To be clear, however, when I say ‘coherence’ I don’t just mean to refer to the coherence of the individual’s actions, otherwise coherence might potentially be subsumed under ‘purposefulness’ from earlier.[[31]](#footnote-31) Rather, what I mean by coherence goes further than just the justification and structuring of one’s efforts, because it also incorporates the intelligibility of all other aspects of one’s life, such as one’s values and guiding beliefs. Essentially, if some feature of one’s life is difficult to comprehend, no matter what it is, then that would count against the coherence of the life.[[32]](#footnote-32)

As with my previous two suggestions, I think we can also draw support for coherence from the so-called crisis of meaning. With the religious picture of the world, we had explanations for where life came from, where life was going, and why anything happened the way it did at all (God’s will). Religious teachings thus gave people a clear way to understand the world and their role in it, but doubt in those teachings took that away, leaving a sense of incomprehension about our place in the universe and even our very nature. As Landau pointed out, for a while it perhaps looked as though science was going to step forward to provide a new comforting and explanatory narrative, but as time has dragged on, and fields such as physics seem to succeed in merely raising more and more questions, our sense that the universe was or could be totally comprehensible once again faltered (1997, p.265).

If this feeling of the universe’s unintelligibility contributed to the emergence (and perhaps strengthening or re-emergence) of the question of life’s meaning, as I believe it likely did, this would provide evidence for my theory that coherence is a key component of the meaningfulness of a life. The claim that coherence and meaningfulness are linked is perhaps less widely accepted than the connection between meaningfulness and purpose or significance, but it still finds support amongst many philosophers. For instance, both Seachris (2009) and O’Brien (2017) note that a request for the meaning of life can be interpreted as a request for some explanation or narrative that can help us *make sense* of life. Therefore, we might reasonably infer that life, or a life, might seem more meaningful the more it makes sense to us.

Landau also identifies coherence as at least one key aspect of meaningfulness (1997, p.263). He points out that we often feel our lives are meaningless when we feel alienated in some way, and this is because such alienation stands in the way of our being able to *understand* our situation. Here Landau references the absurdist works of Camus (*The Stranger*) and Kafka (*The Castle* and *The Trial*) – books which instil a sense of meaninglessness in the reader and primarily, Landau asserts, because their protagonists themselves fail to comprehend the world around them and, displaying strange priorities and emotions, fail to be comprehensible to the reader (p.264). Moreover, only by conceiving of coherence as a kind of meaningfulness can we explain why absurdity – a certain sort of incoherence or incongruity – is treated by so many as a kind of meaninglessness[[33]](#footnote-33) which other theorists, who understand meaningfulness differently, are forced to deny.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The conceptual relationship between coherence and meaningfulness or meaning has also been noted by many others,[[35]](#footnote-35) with Garret Thomson (2003) in particular devoting substantial attention to the notion of a ‘hermeneutic’ theory of life’s meaning. Additionally, we can see Kauppinen’s narrativist theory (2012) as lending some support here. Although he uses the term ‘coherence’ in a technical way, his suggestion that a life is more meaningful the more ‘coherent’ it is – i.e. the more its individual chapters link together to form a unified trajectory of sorts, rather than being randomly structured or entirely disconnected – seems to chime with what I am claiming. Kauppinen’s message is chiefly that it is more meaningful when your earlier efforts lead to your later successes in a ‘coherent’ pattern, even if you would produce an equivalent amount of value by starting from scratch and pursuing a brand-new project every day (p.365-70). I agree and propose that the *reason* the former life strikes us as more meaningful is because it is easier to make sense of.

This conceptual connection between coherence and meaning or meaningfulness is also supported by a host of psychological analyses of meaning in life. For instance, Heintzelman and King state that “The most unadorned version of meaning is... the feeling state that accompanies the presence of sense” (2013, p.91).[[36]](#footnote-36) As evidence for this, there are various studies which seem to demonstrate a relationship between existential meaning and our perception that things are coherent in a more everyday sense. For instance, one study showed that an experience of unintelligible or senseless patterns lowered participants self-reported perceptions that their own lives were meaningful (Heintzelman et al. 2013). Whilst another showed that participants in conditions designed to make them feel life was less meaningful (forced to read Kafka stories etc.) became much more motivated and successful at an arbitrary pattern recognition test (e.g. Proulx and Heine, 2009). The offered explanation for this was that we have a drive to find meaning in the world, especially when we are confronted with meaninglessness. However, this explanation only works if there is, at the very least, a close relationship between meaningfulness and a kind of order, i.e. *coherence*.

Finally, just as with purposefulness and significance, we can point to a natural usage of words like ‘meaningful’ and ‘meaning’ to provide further justification for why it is right to include coherence as a component in this amalgam theory. When a person says a sentence or utterance is ‘meaningless’, quite often what they are saying is that it cannot be *understood*. Similarly, when a person describes, say, a wink or a nod, as ‘meaningful’, what they mean is that there is an *intelligible* message attempting to be conveyed. We can also see this version of meaningfulness being employed when newscasters describe cases of ‘meaningless violence’ – signifying perhaps that the violence had no purpose, but also (and perhaps more saliently) that it simply cannot be understood no matter how hard one tries. Lastly, Seachris points out the clear connection between the traditional question ‘what is the meaning of life?’, and everyday questions of the form ‘what is the meaning of *this*?’ (2009, p.13). Both utterances, Seachris argues, are clearly meant to signal that the individual is confused by the subject of the question, and function as requests for some explanation that would dispel this confusion. If such a question has no obvious answer, however, we might reasonably state that the subject is meaningless, and this would be because there is nothing (correct) which one could possibly say that would render it *intelligible*.[[37]](#footnote-37)

There may be other factors which are relevant to the meaningfulness of a life which I have not identified or discussed here, but I think these three are clearly the most essential and central concepts which should be included in my amalgam theory. How do they fit together though? As I see it, it may be possible for a life to have a minimal kind of meaningfulness with just one or two of these factors present to an adequate degree. For instance, possessing vast significance alone might seem to generate its own sort of meaningfulness even alongside a serious absence of purposefulness or coherence. However, for simplicity and the purposes of this thesis, I will presume that there is a certain sort of very meaningful life, which we could call an ideally meaningful life, or a completely meaningful life, or a life which possess the full gamut of meaningfulness (but from this chapter on I will just call ‘a meaningful life’), for which all three factors are necessary. In other words, to have a meaningful life in this unequivocal sense, your life must possess sufficient levels of purposefulness, significance, *and* coherence. Combining them together, we end up with something like the formula below.

An individual’s life will be meaningful if and only if (and to the extent that) they:

1. Act purposefully and pursue projects, or otherwise play some role or deliberately contribute to some goal for which they may or may not have been created.

(Possibly only if they are subjectively *engaged* with such purposes).

1. Produce significant achievements and affect the world in significant ways.

(Possibly only if their effects are positive or *valuable*).

1. Lead a life which is coherent or comprehensible, i.e. not chaotic or senseless.

To be clear, according to my proposal a life will only be considered meaningful overall if it possesses some sufficient degree of each of these three factors but, having reached this point, possessing more of any particular factor will also increase the degree of meaningfulness in the life. If a life fails to possess any one of these factors to a sufficient degree, however, it could not be considered meaningful overall. A life with *just* coherence and purposefulness and no significance, for instance, could never be meaningful in the unequivocal sense I am defining, no matter how much of the other components it had.

Does this theory fulfil the desiderata laid out earlier? Starting with A, it is true that these three criteria could certainly be described more thoroughly; however, the present level of detail is sufficient for my purposes for the time being, and they will find greater detail as my project progresses.[[38]](#footnote-38) At the very least, I think they should not be taken as obviously failing to satisfy desiderata A. Although the component concepts are not quantified with minute clarity, they are not unanalysable; they could be specified in various ways if necessary. Moreover, I think the concepts of purposefulness, significance, and coherence are familiar enough to us that my theory cannot be accused of turning on any *problematically* vague notions like ‘organic unity’; for instance, we know what purposefulness means, in general, even if I have neglected to provide a strict and exhaustive definition at this point.

Next, I believe my amalgam theory also satisfies desiderata B; the evaluations of meaningfulness it recommends align very closely with most of our typical intuitions about which lives are meaningful, how much, and for what reasons. For instance, individual’s with archetypically meaningful lives such as Einstein, Martin Luther King, and Gandhi fulfil these three criteria to a high degree in that they each led lives with an intelligible structure and content, consisting of long-term efforts resulting in very important and impactful achievements. Yet if we imagine their lives lacking any one of these components, either lacking purposeful actions (so they achieved their impact by accident), significance (so their projects failed), or coherence (so they succeeded in their aims, but their lives were so plagued by randomness and disorder that it is incomprehensible as to how), I think their lives cease to appear ideally meaningful. Likewise, if we imagine a person with essentially nothing of these three factors in their life, such that their existence is at once entirely aimless (in terms of being empty of projects), entirely insignificant (in terms of making no impact on the world at all), and entirely incoherent (in terms of being chaotic to the point of unintelligibility), then such a life may rightly strike us as entirely meaningless.[[39]](#footnote-39)

This theory can also help explain what was less than ideally meaningful about the counter-examples I used against the existing m-theories in 2.2. For instance, the problem with Nozick’s example of God creating us to be food for aliens is that, although this gives our life a purpose, it isn’t a very *significant* achievement for human existence to build to. Similarly, my counter-example of the individual devoted to humiliating himself in front of strangers contains purposeful action but no effects significant enough to secure ideal meaningfulness. The opposite is true for the counter-example I aimed at the consequentialist accounts: the unwilling victim of medical experiments. Here we have an individual whose life produces significant and valuable results, but who lacks any autonomy or purposeful activity himself (and whose life perhaps is also harder to comprehend because of its short and brutal nature). At the cost of making the m-theory less neat and unified then, analysing meaningfulness as an amalgam of concepts involving both purposefulness, significance, and coherence, serves to make the account far stronger and more resistant to counter-examples.

Finally, this amalgam theory of meaningfulness satisfies desiderata C. It is not a description of an artificial concept, derived in an ad-hoc fashion to merely align with our intuitions about which lives are meaningful; we also have good reasons for thinking that it captures the true *sense* (or senses)of the term ‘meaningful’. In other words, unlike Kauppinen’s theory, for which his characterisation of meaningfulness was not entirely compelling, we have reason to think that purposefulness, significance, and coherence *deserve* to be seen as the genuine primary components of meaningfulness. Chiefly, this is because these three concepts are often transparently referred to using the term ‘meaningfulness’ (or similar expressions) in our everyday language: e.g. the *meaning* (purpose) of an action, the *meaningfulness* (significance) of a scientific discovery, and the *meaningfulness* (intelligibility) of some utterance.

This is one reason why it makes sense to see purposefulness, significance, and coherence all unified as dimensions of (ideal) meaningfulness. However, I also think that these facets of meaningfulness resonate with our intuitions about what the meaningfulness of a *life* actually is. One way or another, when we speak of the meaningfulness of a life, that phrase has come to refer to any one of or, more likely, a combination of these three concepts. For instance, if I say, ‘I wish that my life was more meaningful’, I think there are only a few reasonable ways we could interpret that sentence: ‘I wish that my life had more of a purpose’, ‘I wish that my life was more important’, and/or ‘I wish that my life made more sense’. Alternatively, I could be wishing that my life was more meaningful in an ideal or unequivocal sense, as I have proposed we define it, which could amount to the wish that it possessed more of all three components.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Granting my above arguments, this amalgam theory of what makes a life meaningful is both linguistically plausible and intuitively strong on several grounds. At the very least, it stands ahead of anything proposed in the literature so far. Therefore, it is this m-theory which I will take through into the following discussions about death and immortality. I will also use the theory’s tripartite structure to organise my examinations of the mortalist and immortalist arguments into six distinct chapters, assessing first immortality’s hypothetical impact on the purpose (I), significance (II), and coherence (III) of our lives in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, and then performing the same assessment with regard to mortality’s *actual* impact on these facets of our lives in Chapters 6, 7, and 8.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Part Two

3. Immortality and purposefulness

“The band in Heaven plays my favorite song.

They play it once again.

They play it all night long.”

(Talking Heads, 1979)

In Part Two of my thesis I will be examining arguments for what I am calling the ‘mortalist’ position. These are arguments which hold that mortality, the condition of a being who is destined to die at some point, is a condition our lives must possess if they are to be meaningful overall. Most often, these arguments aim to highlight some feature of our mortal lives (usually a direct consequence of our mortality) which they say is essential for meaningfulness. They then seek to demonstrate this claim by asking us to imagine an immortal life and how allegedly meaningless it would be without the feature in question. Consequently, most of my responses will be focused on two sorts of considerations: whether immortal life would really lack this feature, and whether lacking this feature would really make a life meaningless. In Chapter 2, I worked my way to a broad account of meaningfulness which held that a life was meaningful to the extent it possessed three key qualities: purposefulness, significance, and coherence. What I intend to do in the present chapter is discuss only the mortalist arguments which I see as relating to the first of these three qualities. Then in chapters 4 and 5, I will consider the mortalist arguments which relate to significance and coherence, respectively.

3.1 What I mean by ‘immortality’

Given most of the arguments I will be discussing are going to involve claims about immortal life and what it would be like, it would be helpful to first try and characterise what is usually meant by ‘immortality’ and how I will intend the term to be understood during the following chapters. A natural way of understanding immortality is simply as the condition of a living being which never dies. However, there is some ambiguity here which could make a drastically important difference later. First of all, we can distinguish between ‘medical immortality’ and ‘true immortality’ (Cave, 2012, p.63). ‘Medical immortality’ refers to the condition of a creature who does not age and is not vulnerable to disease. In other words, a creature who would live forever under the right circumstances, provided they were not shot or crushed or burnt etc. A ‘true immortal’, on the other hand, is a being who literally cannot die from any possible cause and thus will live for eternity no matter what. Another similar but subtly distinct way of dividing up kinds of immortality is to speak of ‘contingent immortality’ and ‘necessary immortality’ (Steele, 1976). A ‘necessary immortal’ is essentially the same as a true immortal: someone who will live for eternity and simply cannot die. Whereas a ‘contingent immortal’ is someone who is capable of dying from certain causes, but otherwise could also conceivably live for eternity. Medical immortals can therefore be seen as a sub-set of contingent immortals.

For my purposes in the following chapters, when I speak of immortal beings, I will be referring to truly or necessarily immortal beings. This is because the subject I am interested in is the relationship that mortality has to the meaningfulness of our lives, both in terms of death making our lives finitely long in actuality and in terms of the constant risk of death that shadows us. Such a risk is still present for the contingent or medical immortal, however, so they are not the right subjects for comparison. Although contingently/medically immortal beings may actually live forever, the possibility of death would always be present, even if it was distant, and so in a very important sense they would still be mortal beings, just mortal beings who happen to live an infinitely long time.

Nevertheless, is true immortality practically or theoretically plausible? First of all, putting aside the considerable technicalities of overcoming aging and diseases, how could we stop a living thing dying if it fell off the side of a cliff, or was hit by a nuclear bomb,[[42]](#footnote-42) or sucked into a black hole? The toughness or resilience necessary for such invincibility simply does not seem feasible in our natural world. Moreover, we might wonder if a literally endless life is even possible in our universe given its allegedly inevitable heat-death. This is a widely accepted scientific theory which predicts that our universe will eventually reach a state of maximum entropy meaning that, given long enough, all the stars will die, the universe will turn cold as their energy is spread thinly across all space, and it will become impossible for any kind of life (biological or even artificial) to continue. If this hypothesis is accurate, then it seems to imply that true or necessary immortality – a life which literally never comes to an end – would be impossible.

There have been responses made to both kinds of issue, however. For instance, with regard to bombs and black holes, one might point out that an immortal being might not necessarily require a single physically indestructible body. Instead, perhaps true immortality could be achieved by having a system whereby our body could be reassembled after it had been destroyed,[[43]](#footnote-43) or our consciousness could somehow be transferred into a back-up body that had been prepared. Alternatively, perhaps we could upload our minds to computers and live in a simulated world where we really could be indestructible. Although, whether something like mind-uploading would even count as a true extension of someone’s life is a controversial question.

Similar somewhat far-fetched suggestions have been made in response to the heat-death problem. Even assuming the scientists’ predictions here turn out to be accurate,[[44]](#footnote-44) there have been proposals of various ways we could either reverse entropy, say, by re-creating the big bang, or work within the process of increasing entropy to simulate what felt like an infinitely long life despite it occurring within a finite time (More, 1996). These notions are certainly fanciful, and yet who can say precisely what human ingenuity might be able to develop given enough time?

Alternatively, another recourse is to accept that true immortality might be impossible in our natural world, but to raise the possibility of some kind of supernatural immortality, such as a religious-style afterlife in Heaven. In such a case we would presumably no longer be tied to the limitations of the physical universe and so, both in terms of indestructibility and a genuinely infinitely prolonged world to live in, true immortality might be possible.

The problem I have with imagining immortality in any of these forms (beyond their questionable plausibility), is that it would introduce untold complications to the discussions I want to have. What I want to isolate is simply the effect that death has on the meaningfulness of our lives, but if we were immortal in any of the ways described above, our lives would be different in a host of other significant ways. For instance, living through a series of clones, or in a simulated world, or in Heaven, would all be such drastically different forms of life, it would be difficult, first of all, to make any predictions about what such a life would be like, and second of all, it would be difficult to establish whether any fluctuations in meaningfulness were caused specifically by the absence of death, or by one of the many other changes which had transpired for us to achieve this immortality.

Given this, I am also going to stipulate that when I talk about immortality in the next few chapters, what I intend to refer to is a life essentially identical to the one we are currently living in all ways except for the presence of death. In other words, the immortal beings I have in mind will still be embodied just like us and still have our usual capacities and needs, it will simply be the case that they cannot die.[[45]](#footnote-45) I understand that this form of life is technically impossible since, if the immortals are truly embodied ‘just like us’, then they should be able to die from being crushed, burned, shot etc. Nevertheless, I must ignore this issue if I am going to be able to isolate just that variable that I want to examine; to ensure that any difference in meaningfulness is the result of our no longer being mortal, rather than because we are, say, no longer embodied, I will have to stipulate that we imagine everything else in our lives, except for the possibility of death, remains the same.

I don’t think that ignoring the practicalities of immortality is actually problem at this stage, however, because what we are trying to discover is the nature of the impact mortality actually has on the meaningfulness of our lives through imagining how those lives would hypothetically change if death was no longer a factor. Thus, it is acceptable, for now, to envisage immortality the way I have suggested. It may be interesting if any practically possible immortality would be meaningless for reasons other than the absence of death itself (e.g. because we no longer have bodily desires or needs), but that is not what I have set out to assess here.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Having now established what I mean ‘immortality’ to refer to, I can now move on to consider the three broad and somewhat overlapping mortalist arguments which I will be responding to in this chapter. Each argument can be interpreted as making the claim that immortal life would end up empty of any kind of purposeful activity, and would therefore be meaningless, either because we need death as a deadline to be motivated to do anything (3.2), because we need life to be fragile and finite in order to value its contents (3.3), or because immortal life would simply become too boring to engage with (3.4). In each case, I will argue that there may be a pearl of wisdom in each of these claims, but that their conclusions about what immortality would be like are vastly over-exaggerated.

3.2 The motivation argument

3.2.1 Deadlines

Mortalists, as I have termed them, are those who think that mortality is required for our lives to be in any way meaningful. There are many different arguments mortalists have given for their position, but the first one I will consider in this chapter is one of the more popular: the motivation argument.[[47]](#footnote-47) This argument stems from the straightforward recognition that, generally, deadlines and the fear of missing them can provide us with a powerful motivation to act. For instance, students are often most motivated to write their coursework essays when the submission date is looming, while chores without a specific due-date can find themselves being ignored indefinitely.

The next step of the argument is then to point out that death itself can be seen as a kind of deadline. However, as Brooke Alan Trisel notes, our death does not stand merely as the deadline for any single project in our lives, but is the ultimate deadline for *all* of them (2015, p.65). Moreover, he continues, it is a kind of deadline which is both *permanent* and *non-renegotiable*; if you haven’t done something you wanted to do in life by the time you die, there will literally never be another chance for you to do it, and no way to try and haggle for an extension.

It would be reasonable to perceive death as being a kind of super-deadline then, and thus conclude that, like other deadlines, it could be a powerful motivating force. Trisel finds anecdotal support for this claim in the observation that many people who receive diagnoses of terminal illnesses apparently become more engaged with their lives and more motivated to complete their projects (p.66). The alleged explanation for this fact is that their awareness of the unusual *shortness* of their remaining life prompts them to make the most of the time they have left. The idea that mortality motivates us is also echoed by Stephen Cave who claims that “The constraint of finite time shapes our every decision. It is what drives us to get out of bed in the morning, to finish studying and get into the world” (2012, p.284). Later on, Cave adds: “The fact of mortality imparts to our existence an urgency and allows us to give it shape and meaning” (p.306).

Granting for now that our sense of our own mortality provides us with a kind of existential urgency or impetus to pursue our plans and engage with the world, it seems like it might be an important factor in our ability to live *purposeful* lives and – since purposefulness is a key component of meaningfulness as I argued in Chapter 2 – our ability to live *meaningful* lives as well. The claim many make is even stronger than this, however: that without the deadline of death, our lives would suffer such a lack of motivation that we would no longer be driven to do *anything* at all. For instance, Victor Frankl asserts:

“If we were immortal, we could legitimately postpone every action forever. It would be of no consequence whether or not we did a thing now; every act might just as well be done tomorrow or the day after or a year from now or ten years hence. But in the fact of death as absolute *finis* to our future and boundary to our possibilities, we are under the imperative of utilizing our lifetimes to the utmost, not letting the singular opportunities… pass by unused.” (Frankl, 1957, p.73)

The flip side of the claim that mortality motivates us is that, with an infinite amount of time, our motivation could be drastically or entirely reduced. With no possibility of our lives being over at any point, it may seem as though any activity can be postponed indefinitely and so our projects may never even be *started* let alone completed. Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin state the worry neatly: “At any given time, we may not be moved to do anything about what we care about because there will always be time to do something about it later” (2014, p.363). Thus, “one might think that this lack of urgency and time-constraint would sap (some of) one’s motivation to pursue various of one’s projects, and perhaps even (all of) one’s motivation to pursue all of them” (p.362).

The mortalist motivation argument can be stated formally as follows:

1. Immortal beings would not have any deadlines in their lives (i.e. they could legitimately postpone any action forever with no negative consequences.)
2. Deadlines are necessary for us to be motivated to do anything.
3. The lives of immortal beings would be empty of any purposeful activity.
4. Purposeful activity is required for meaningfulness.
5. Immortal beings would have meaningless lives.

Alternatively, as Trisel summarises it: since the deadline of death is a powerful motivating force, if we were immortal and without this deadline, it may well be that “we would be unmotivated to take action. Consequently, nothing would get done... and our lives would become meaningless” (2015, p.64).

Something like this argument appears often in the literature and in the discussions of lay-people, but I think it is misguided in several ways. The first reason I think we should doubt the claim that immortal beings would be perpetually bed-ridden with laziness is that premise 1 is wrong; immortal beings could not postpone *any* action forever with *no* negative consequences. Niko Kolodny, for one, points out that, although some kind of deadline or temporal scarcity might be necessary to motivate us, there are many varieties of such scarcity in our world besides the finitude of our own lives, and most would remain for immortals (2013, p.167). For instance, if an immortal being wished to attend or observe certain events, or engage with certain objects, they would have to do it while those objects are there to be engaged with. Even things such as the Egyptian pyramids will crumble sooner or later, so if we want to experience them, we will have to do it sometime soon (relative to the scale of an infinite life).[[48]](#footnote-48) Just because an immortal being would exist forever, that doesn't mean that everything else would as well. Similarly, aside from the finitude of other events, objects, or places, there are other kinds of deadline or temporal motivation, such as the motivation to be first to discover something or achieve something, or the desire to create something *during the time* in which it can still be fully appreciated or made use of (p.168). Furthermore, and on a darker note, Kolodny points out that an immortal society might not be a utopia; there may be competition for many kinds of limited resources (p.168).

Laurence James, who is sympathetic to the mortalist arguments, observes that mortal life, in virtue of its “scarcity of time and opportunities” has two important features: *urgency* – “if I do not get this right now, I will not ever be able to” – and *precariousness* – “if I mess this up I will not have another chance” (2009, p.59). However, he then erroneously concludes that “Since an immortal life is free of death, it is also free of these structuring concerns. And free of these structuring concerns the Immortal will have no impetus to shape his life” (P.59). Yet, as I hope to have demonstrated, this is obviously incorrect; having unlimited time is not the same as having unlimited opportunities to engage with *anything* we want. As Kolodny pointed out, there will be many opportunities an immortal could miss out on which would never come around again. An immortal being who wished to visit the twin towers in New York would have now missed his chance – no matter how long he lives this opportunity will never come around again. (At least, he cannot visit the *original* twin towers). Thus, it seems an immortal life can indeed display a degree of both urgency and precariousness in its content. In other words, it will have kinds of temporal scarcity that function as deadlines.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin agree with Kolodny, and similarly point out the temporal scarcity that will remain in many of the objects in an immortal’s world. However, they also mention a stronger example of actions which cannot be postponed indefinitely without negative consequences:

“[Some] activities require action now because of their nature – such as the pursuit of certain pleasures or the avoidance of pain, suffering, alienation, depression, and so forth. The realization that ‘‘one will always have time’’ does not offer much comfort to someone in agonizing pain now” (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2014, p.368).

This move is also made by Trisel who asserts:

“Granted, many actions, such as writing a novel, could be postponed indefinitely. However, some actions would still need to be performed urgently. For example, if an immortal person is in an automobile accident, trapped in the car, and in excruciating pain, extracting this person from the wreckage and alleviating her pain is something that could not be postponed” (Trisel, 2015, p.64).

In fact, I think the example of writing a novel is not perfect here, as we can imagine the *reason* a person might want to write a novel is so that it will be enjoyed, but a novel written ‘too late’ might fail to entertain if its lateness causes it to come across as clichéd or unoriginal. Nevertheless, the point just made directs us to a deeper problem with the motivation argument: premise 2 is also wrong; our motivation does not come *solely* from the existence of deadlines.

Cave argues that immortality would be problematic for “those who leave everything to the last minute... as there would never be one” (2012, p.285). But the obvious response is that *not everyone* is one of these last-minute people and, even for those who are, they are not last-minute about absolutely *everything*. The point I want to make is that we are primarily motivated to do many things, not because we are afraid we will miss the deadline for doing them, but because we straightforwardly *want* to do them. If I go to the pub with my friends tonight, it won’t *chiefly* be because I am afraid I will miss my chance to see them again (e.g. by dying before I get around to it), but simply because I anticipate *enjoying* my time with them and I’d always rather have an enjoyable evening than an empty and unenjoyable one. All things considered, it would never make sense to postpone a purely pleasurable experience to do *nothing* when you could be enjoying that experience instead(presuming such experiences are not costly or limited). Given pleasurable moments are intrinsically attractive to us then, I need no external motivation, such as a deadline, to convince me to pursue them. Though it is true that deadlines can provide *added* motivation for us to do certain things, it is clearly untrue that we need them to persuade us to do *anything*.

Trisel makes this point clearer by distinguishing between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivators. The former are the inherent features of something which motivate us to interact with it, and the latter are externally introduced motivations for doing something, such as a deadline or an additional reward (2015, p.68-69). For instance, the pleasing taste of ice-cream is an intrinsic motivator to eat it now, while the fact it will melt provides an additional extrinsic motivation. Where the motivation argument seems to go wrong, is in its apparent assumption that there are *no* intrinsic motivators (and, perhaps, that death is the *only* extrinsic motivator that matters). If this were true, then losing death as our final urgent deadline might have a dramatic effect on our motivation, but it is not true.

Two good examples Trisel gives here are of Einstein and Mandela: both lived what we typically assume to be very purposeful and meaningful lives, but according to their reported reasons for acting, they did not stress “mortality awareness” as a key motivator for their actions, but instead a scientific curiosity and a love for one's people and homeland, respectively (p.68). We cannot know exactly what was going on in the heads of these men, so we cannot disprove the allegation that there may have been some unconscious mortality-awareness spurring them on, but given the reasons provided *alone* seem to be compelling enough, why should we assume there is more to the story? Do we have any good reason to think an immortal Einstein would be any less driven by his curiosity, or an immortal Mandela would find the suffering of his people any more acceptable? Thus, Trisel concludes, it appears that mortality awareness “is not necessary for a person to lead a meaningful life” (p.70).

Cave comments, during his discussion of an immortal life's lack of urgency, “If it looked to be a rainy millennium, you could spend the thousand years in bed” (2012, p.285), and it is true, one could. But why would one want to, given firstly, that one would miss out *forever* on all the opportunities available only during that millennia, and secondly, that spending a thousand years in bed would simply be less rewarding than actually going out and trying to spend one’s time productively? There are evidently *intrinsic* reasons which would motivate us to leave the house and pursue the things we desire, regardless of any external motivators like the time limit set by our mortality, and these intrinsic motivators completely undermine the motivation argument’s key premise (2).

3.2.2 Wasting time

Another way Cave puts something like the motivation argument is by claiming that, “If your time were infinite, it would no longer make sense to talk of it being wasted” (2012, p.285). Something like this assertion is repeated by James, who states: “To the imperative, 'Stop wasting time!', it is likely that an Immortal would respond: Why? After all, time is something the Immortal has in overabundance” (2009, p.59). Here, both men seem to be suggesting that somehow the quality of any one moment of an immortal’s life will no longer concern them because there will be infinite moments still to come, and consequently they would lack motivation and likely do *nothing but* ‘waste their time’ (as we mortals would see it). Yet this is patently false. As Frances Kamm nicely expresses it:

“it would be peculiar to think that if one has only a little bit of life, it does matter if one wastes it, but if one has an infinite amount of life, it does not matter if one wastes it. Just because one can never waste it all (there is always more to waste), this does not mean that waste would not matter” (Kamm, 2003, p.210).

Kamm’s comments seem correct, but to see exactly how Cave and James have gone wrong, it will be useful to reconstruct what appears to be their argument:

1. Immortals have an infinite amount of time.
2. If one has an infinite amount of time, then wasting it is no longer a concern.
3. Immortal beings would have no motivation to avoid wasting their time.
4. The lives of immortal beings would be empty of any purposeful activity.
5. Purposeful activity is required for meaningfulness.
6. Immortal beings would have meaningless lives.

The mistake in the above argument might now be clear. The notion of ‘wasting time’ can either refer to a person *running out* of time to do something, or it can refer to them spending their time in an unproductive way. The argument then uses this ambiguity to mistakenly move from the claim that an immortal does not need to worry about running out of time (premise 2), to the patently false claim that immortals would have no motivation to spend their time productively (premise 3). This would be equivalent to arguing that a person with infinite riches could not care about spending it poorly, but such a claim is equally misguided; this person could still wish to avoid spending their wealth on worthless or immoral things, and thereby *wasting* the money they spent (in the second sense) even while their bank account remained infinitely full. Similarly, an immortal could care to avoid *wasting* their time (again, in the second sense) by spending it on boring, destructive, or painful activities, in lieu of productive or enjoyable ones, even while their remaining lifespan never ran down.

Both the initial version of the motivation argument and this new time-wasting version would only make sense if we assume that wasting time in the first sense – i.e. missing deadlines/our opportunity to do things – is the only form of time-wasting we care about avoiding. That way we would happily sit around doing nothing, provided there would be no chance of running out of time to do any particular thing.[[49]](#footnote-49) Nevertheless, this ignores the obvious truth I have been stressing that the boredom of an unproductive or ‘wasted’ day (in the second sense), and the pain of knowing one missed out on something better, is also something we are very concerned to avoid. Since we are always interested in having better rather than worse days no matter how many days we have left, as Kamm summarises:

“it is not true that if there is no death, ...and there is no end to the possibility of future real goods, that one need not care, even continually, about the content of one’s life... No one should think, ‘I’m going to live forever; it does not matter how I live.’” (Kamm, 2003, p.211)

Alternatively, the mortalists could try to salvage the above argument, if they could provide some cogent reason for thinking immortality would cause us to entirely lose our ability to tell what we liked and didn’t like, or what was good and bad. If this were the case, then wasting our time in the second sense (i.e. spending it poorly) *would* become something we no longer cared about, or even something that was impossible for us, since now each experience or consequence would be perceived as no better or worse than any other. That way there genuinely would be no penalty for immortal beings staying in bed for millennia, and hence the motivation argument might reconnect with its conclusion that such lives would end up purposeless.

In fact, some mortalists, including Cave, attempt to make just this strange argument. For instance, Cave asserts that, for an immortal being: “time is worthless, [and] it becomes impossible to make rational decisions about how to spend it” (2012, p.285). Here, Cave seems to be expressing the extreme opinion that gaining eternal life would, for some reason, prevent us from making judgements about which activities or projects are better or worse. That somehow immortal beings, in virtue of their infinite life, could no longer evaluate potential activities or experiences whatsoever. If this was true, then every choice would seem equally preferable to us and our normal decision-making would effectively come to a halt, rendering our lives purposeless and meaningless. Yet, why should we believe this claim? We have just seen that we can be motivated by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, so why would immortals be incapable of using those intrinsic factors to make decisions about what to do? Jeff Noonan provides the following reasoning:

“Were death somehow overcome, then people... would no longer need to make evaluative choices between different possibilities. Such lives would be insipid, devoid of meaning because they would be devoid of the limitations that force mortals to reflect upon different possibilities for action: which course is better, which is worse, which is good, which is bad, which is right, which is wrong.” (Noonan, 2013, p.20)

The argument being made here is apparently that it is only through the temporal limitation of our mortality that humans are pressured into developing our preferences and our sense of what is and isn't worthwhile. It is because we have only 80 years to live that we are forced to choose what in life to focus on and what to ignore. Thus, it is necessary for us to draw up our ranking of which different projects, careers, and values are the most important to us, so at the end of our lives we can be satisfied in having achieved the things we cared about *most*.[[50]](#footnote-50) Comments made by Samuel Scheffler suggest he might support this sort of argument as well. For instance, he claims that, “Those [mortal] limits... force upon us the need to... guide our lives under a conception of which things are worth doing and caring about and choosing” and, partly as a consequence of this, he claims that if our lifespans were unlimited, “it is at best unclear how far we would be guided by ideas of value at all” (2013, p.99).

There may be some truth in the above observations: since there are so many more opportunities available to immortals and hence the prospect of missing out on what really mattered to them is reduced, it does seem that they would be under less pressure than mortals to reflect on which things they value most. However, it is plain to see that conclusions such as Cave’s – that immortal beings could not make rational decisions about how to spend their time – are *far* too strong. Though an immortal would lack such an urgent need to *prioritise* what to concentrate on first (because, in a sense, they would also have a second, third, fourth... chances at life), this would not take away all the intrinsic qualities of objects and experiences which I have been speaking of so far. Thus, there would still be choices which present themselves to immortal beings as better or worse, right or wrong, in virtue of their internal characteristics, such as whether they produced contentment or misery, both for themselves and others. It makes no sense to suggest that an immortal could not evaluate the wrongness of torture or the goodness of helping others just because they no longer had a time limit to pressure them into *ranking* their preferences of things. Neither does it make sense that an immortal couldn't have a rational preference between reading a novel and poking themselves in the eye, just because they had the time to do *both* eventually. Pleasure is innately desirable to us and pain is the opposite, and we need no external pressure or deadlines to come to these realisations.

An immortal being would therefore be capable of judging between better or worse ways to spend their days, and hence they would be both capable of and averse to wasting their time, i.e. spending it poorly. Moreover, while we can admit that mortals are far more constrained than immortals in terms of what we will eventually *miss out* on doing, it is false to suggest that immortals would be under *no* pressure to reflect on their own personal rankings. For instance, of all the things in the universe, they would still have to decide which they wanted to do *at all*, and of all the things they are interested in, which to do now and which to save for later, and with what intensity they should be pursuing them.

To summarise, firstly, immortal life would not be empty of deadlines and, even if it was, it is false that we would actually *need* such deadlines to motivate us, let alone the deadline of death. This is because there are features of objects and activities which function as *intrinsic* motivators to action, and we have no reason for thinking they would cease to motivate us even if we knew we could never die. Secondly, it is false that without temporal limitations on our lives, we would be incapable of wasting time (in terms of being inert or unproductive) or unconcerned at the prospect. As Kamm pointed out, just because immortals would never run out of time to spend, that doesn’t mean they couldn’t spend it poorly, and the intrinsically desirable (or undesirable) features of objects and activities ensure they would still care about spending it poorly. On these grounds at least, we can thus expect purposeful activity will be present in immortal lives just as it is in mortal ones. We have seen no reason (yet) for doubting that immortal beings would have preferences just like us, and the intrinsic motivation produced by these preferences, combined with a decent amount of genuine temporal scarcity in the *contents* of the immortal’s world, would be more than enough to drive them to action.

Nevertheless, a weaker mortalist thesis might actually be true here: that immortal beings would not lose *all* their motivation without death but that, lacking this temporal constraint, their lifestyles would become more languid, and thus less *full* of purposeful activity to at least some extent. This seems a reasonable conclusion, however, I would hesitate before accepting it as a clear *downside* of immortality, even with regard to meaningfulness. To explain: many of the mortalists seem to treat an urgency to act and the pressure to prioritise as unobjectionably good things about mortal life, but this is far from obvious. For instance, in response to the suggestion that the best, most meaningful lives are the ones lived under demanding deadlines, Timothy Chappell poignantly wrote:

“That sounds to me a bit like insisting that the only way to write a good philosophy essay is under exam pressure. Well, certainly exam pressure produces thoughts that wouldn’t otherwise pop out so easily. However, it also leads us to loose thinking, to grabbing the first plausible idea that comes to mind” (Chappell, 2007, p.35-36).

In a similar sort of vein, Trisel (2015, P.69), and Senyo Whyte (2012, p.494) both stress that individual human beings are sometimes different: while one might find meaningfulness and motivation in working under the threat of a looming deadline, another person might find only anxiety, fear, and consequently *de*motivation. Noonan writes, “Ultimately the life-value of death comes down to making each moment of life urgent” (2013, p.23). Yet, does everyone *really* want this? Couldn’t the opportunity to procrastinate and ponder our options be a good thing? A less breakneck pace could lead to our building a life which is still purposeful but is ultimately both more significant and coherent (the other two core components of meaningfulness). It may well be as Martha Nussbaum suggests, that “If people weren’t always racing against the clock, they would probably find more meaning in each thing rather than less…” (2013, p.40).

3.3 The valuation argument

Above I have considered and rejected the argument that death is necessary for life to be meaningful because we need death as a deadline to motivate us to action. However, this is not the only argument that mortalists have made. Why else should we think that an immortal life would necessarily end up meaningless? One justification commonly given for this belief is that we find things more precious the more rare, delicate, or fleeting they are. The general idea is, as James Lenman points out, that “*value* relates to *scarcity”* in some significant way (2004, p.328). For example, the more of something we have, or perhaps also the more resilient or replaceable something is, the less precious it is to us. Taking this general thought and applying it to the duration of a life, it might then appear that the more life we have the less valuable it will be, to the extent that an *immortal* life, being infinitely long in duration, will have its value shrunk to an infinitesimal size. Michael Sigrist seems to subscribe to this perspective when, in his discussion of the importance of death and his account of ‘four plausible conditions for meaning and value’, he asserts that, “Diamonds are much more valuable than oxygen… because diamonds are much more scarce” (2015, p.100). Similarly, George Hart, claims: “Just as wine is good if only the glass is to become empty, life can have meaning only if it must end” (2003).

Importantly, however, although the above two quotes may mislead, the mortalist argument most commonly made here is not that life would actually lose its value if we became immortal, but rather that it would lose its value *in our eyes*. As Geoffrey Scarre puts it:

“[because] fragile and passing things are valued at a premium by us, since we know they will not always be there and that we must make the most of them while they are... If I were to live for ever, my life and all it contains would lose this preciousness in both my own and other people's eyes” (Scarre, 2007, p.54).[[51]](#footnote-51)

In other words, nothing is being claimed here about the genuine worth or preciousness of our lives, but rather how worthy or precious they appear to us. Whether one thinks that diamonds are in fact more valuable than oxygen is beside the point, therefore; what matters is our perceptions of value in this regard and, crucially, our perceptions of value do seem to be influenced by considerations of fragility or rarity quite often. As John Fischer describes: “there may indeed be some experiences in life that we savour and value... because we know that we will not enjoy them forever” (2009, p.92), and the glass of wine might be a good example of this; certainly, if price is any indication of how much we value things, the most expensive bottles of wine are often the rarest and not necessarily the best tasting. Similarly, despite being very valuable, things like fresh water and oxygen are often not treated as such because they *appear* to be so inexhaustible.

Quickly though, why should we care about our mere *perception* of the value of immortal life? The threat to meaningfulness here is similar to the one discussed in the previous section; if we do cease to value an object or activity for whatever reason, then we won't be motivated to acquire or interact with it regardless of its real worth. Even if building a boat or climbing a mountain remain worthwhile things to do, if I cease to see them that way, I will presumably neglect to do those things, and therefore my life will lose whatever purposefulness it would have gained if I had engaged with those projects. Thus, even if immortal lives don’t actually lose their value, but simply lose their value *in our eyes*, they may end up deprived of any *purposeful* activity, and therefore meaningfulness, simply because nothing moves us anymore.

Before evaluating this argument, however, it would be useful to first understand *why* this relationship between scarcity and our perceptions of value seems to hold. The most plausible explanation, I think, can be drawn from Cave. He states that “an awareness that this day might be your last... does help to *focus* the mind on the present” (2012, p.301, my emphasis). In light of this, perhaps what makes experiences of rare or fragile things feel more valuable than other experiences is that an awareness of this scarcity causes us to *focus* more on the experiences we're having. This makes sense when we consider a few examples; for instance, when we deliberately savour the taste of a bite of food, its flavour is experienced as more intense and more enjoyable. Similarly, an awareness that the goal of a project was rare or hard to achieve may also increase our estimation of its value, simply because that rarity leads us to *pay closer attention* to the positive qualities of that potential achievement. Whilst, on the other hand, neglecting to pay conscious attention to some object or state of affairs also seems to often coincide with a lack of awareness of that thing's true value: for example, one might fail to value a committed and compassionate friend if one never takes the time to consider how much emotional effort they devote to the relationship.

This analysis is supported by Garrett Thomson who observes that “the appreciation of value depends on the strength or the vividness of our awareness or consciousness” (2003, p.123). Granting this, the noted relationship between scarcity and our valuations can plausibly be seen as being totally mediated by the variable of *how much attention* we’re paying to the object. When Julian Baggini says, “Moments of pleasure are precious *because* they pass” (2005, p.133), therefore, this is not quite true; moments of pleasure are precious arguably because they’re *pleasurable*, first and foremost. Nevertheless, what their finitude does do is help us focus on that pleasure and really appreciate it, rather than take it for granted.

Furthermore, and relevantly for this discussion, for a person who has been given a terminal diagnosis, scarcity has been introduced into every moment of their lives. Therefore, the individual may pay greater focus to *everything* they come across, and this could explain the empirical observations noted earlier that those with less time to live are often more motivated and live more passionately than others. Thomson also discusses this thought, noting that, when we are close to death, we may well be more conscious of our experiences and thus “our appreciation of life typically will be full” (2003, p.123). On a similar note, Noonan writes, “the more one meditates on the shortness of life, the more intensely will one value the limited range of experiences, activities, and relationships that fill out one’s life” (2013, p.16), and Eagleton stresses how, with an awareness of our mortality, “we would be better able to see things for what they are, as well as to relish them more fully. In this sense, death enhances and intensifies life, rather than voiding it of value” (2008, p.91). In light of the above, we could now set out this valuation argument as follows:

1. To appreciate something’s value, we have to pay full attention to it.
2. To pay full attention to something, we have to perceive it as being scarce.
3. Immortal beings would not perceive their lives as being scarce.
4. Immortal beings would not pay full attention to their lives.
5. Immortal beings would not appreciate the value of their lives.
6. If a person sees their life as valueless, they will do nothing.
7. Purposeful activity is required for meaningfulness.
8. Immortal beings would have meaningless lives.

This argument appears to be valid, at first glance; however, we might wonder whether speaking of ‘life’ as the object of our evaluations is the right way of expressing it. Theorists here often talk about our ‘life’ or ‘time’ itself as a thing which we can be induced to value more the more fragile or finite it is. For instance, Cave asserts that, “given infinity, *time* would lose its worth” (2012, p.285, my emphasis).[[52]](#footnote-52) Nevertheless, I believe it is incorrect to treat our ‘life’ or 'time' themselves as the objects of value here. Our time is not *in itself* valuable to us at all; for example, a dying man would not value another year if it was spent in a coma or being tortured. Instead, we should think of our ‘time’ or our 'life' as a *container* for the goods we can experience or produce. Thus, if we treat the years of our life as something to be cherished, it is only because they act as a container that we can fill with worthwhile projects and other things we desire. A dying man treasures his last year, not because the *time* itself has become precious then – time is just time – but because he can only fit a few more good experiences and deeds into his life before it is over. Therefore, what he actually cares about is what he can *do* with his last year, not about the year itself because it is the *content* of our lives that we primarily value, not the container.

To put this another way, it has been argued by Lucretius that life is similar to a banquet in that both have a value for us which cannot be increased merely by extending their duration in time (and may even be harmed by such extension). Similarly, Terry Eagleton compares life to a play, stating: “since it is in the nature of a play not to last too long. We do not want to sit in the theatre for ever. Why then should the brevity of life not be equally acceptable?” (2008, p.39). However, if my point above stands, then the banquet/play comparison is misguided because it treats our time as an object of value itself, rather than as a container which objects of value, like banquets, can be placed in. This acknowledged, the valuation argument presented above claimed that making our lives infinitely long would cause us to value them less. However, we can see now that this does not make sense; increasing the size of this container cannot devalue it for us since bare life or time itself already has no value to us, as we have seen above. What matters is whether we can still value the things we fill the container with, even if that container became indestructible and infinitely large.

This is what the mortalist needs to argue then: not that our life or time themselves would be devalued for us if we became immortal, but that this would result in the *contents* of our lives appearing less valuable to us. In other words, that our ability to care about the everydayobjects, experiences, or goals within our lives is somehow dependent on the lives themselves being finite or fragile. Indeed, along these lines, Scheffler argues that there are certain background facts of our lives which make it possible for the activity of valuing things to go on at all – which he calls “the circumstances of value” – and mortality is an important or even essential one of those facts (2013, p.99). Thus, becoming immortal would mean we lacked a crucial element of the circumstances of value, and we would find ourselves unable to care about or appreciate anything *in* our lives, no matter what its qualities.[[53]](#footnote-53) Scheffler concludes that “our ability to lead value-laden lives is not only compatible with the fact that we will die but actually depends on it” (p.108), and therefore that “there is a sense in which death gives the meaning to life” (p.90). Nussbaum alsoexamines and argues for a very similar sounding claim:[[54]](#footnote-54)

“the structure of human experience, and therefore of the empirical human sense of value, is inseparable from the finite temporal structure within which human life is actually lived. Our finitude, and in particular our mortality... is a constitutive factor in all valuable things' having for us the value that they in fact have.” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.225-226)

These claims might sound odd, but we can make some sense of them if we remind ourselves, again, that finitude or scarcity may be related to our perceptions of value *through* influencing how much attention we pay to the relevant objects. If a mortal being drinks a glass of wine, for instance, they might be aware not only that *this* experience with *this* wine will come to an end, but that *all* their wine-drinking experiences will one day come to an end. Thus, they may be moved to focus more on the quality of the wine and better appreciate its value. On the other hand, if an immortal being drank the same glass of wine, they would do so with the awareness that they could have infinitely many similar wine-drinking experiences in the future. Thus, they may fail to focus on this particular experience and hence neglect the value in it. Moreover, it is possible to see how immortals might neglect to appreciate the value in *anything* in their lives on similar grounds.

We can now see one prima-facie plausible way becoming immortal could devalue the *contents* of our lives for us: arguably, living infinitely long, we would no longer have to worry about failing to appreciate something before we lost it forever, because all experiences or objects or goals could be re-found at a later date. Therefore, we might cease to see the value of things in our lives simply because we ceased to pay attention to them properly. In such a case, immortality would not make us value our lives themselves less, but it would make our opportunities for future experiences and accomplishments less scarce, and thus could decrease the attention we pay to our current experiences and aims and our subsequent valuation of them, because we know there may be indefinitely more of similar sorts to come.[[55]](#footnote-55)

This updated valuation argument could be stated as follows:

1. To appreciate something’s value, we have to pay full attention to it.
2. To pay full attention to something, we have to perceive it as being scarce.
3. Immortal beings would not perceive anything in their lives (e.g. goals, objects, experiences) as being scarce, because they have an infinite amount of time to re-discover or reproduce such things in the future.
4. Immortal beings would not pay full attention to anything in their lives.
5. Immortal beings would not appreciate the value of anything in their lives.
6. If a person sees their life as containing nothing of value, they will do nothing.
7. Purposeful activity is required for meaningfulness.
8. Immortal beings would have meaningless lives.

Once again, this argument appears to be valid; however, there is one reason we might think it certainly goes wrong, regardless of exactly *how* it goes wrong, which can be found in the often-reported fact that near-death experiences can have a dramatic effect on our attitudes. For instance, Cave writes: “People who narrowly escape death frequently experience a realisation of the shortness of life and at the same time a new-found joy in its preciousness” (2012, p.285). Presumably, this fact was introduced to support the mortalist claim that consciousness of death can increase the extent to which we value the contents of our lives. However, it may actually *undermine* their desired conclusions about immortality.

Specifically, the fact that near-death experiences cause a dramatic *change* in a person’s attitudes seems to indicate that the experience awoke them to the reality of death *for the first time*. Thus, the observation actually indicates that most people aren’t really all that conscious of their mortality, despite being able to live value-laden and purposeful lives. If this observation is true, it may be catastrophic for the current valuation argument since its main claim is that immortality would suffer because it is specifically a constant, underlying *awareness* of our finitude which makes the contents of our mortal lives appear valuable at all.[[56]](#footnote-56) If it is true that most typical people *rarely* contemplate their deaths then, as many theorists suggest,[[57]](#footnote-57) one of the mortalists’ key assumptions turns out to be untrue.

Furthermore, even if we assume that normal adults do not live under the illusion of immortality, we still might find evidence that the valuation argument goes wrong when we consider infants or animals. Unlike adult humans, it is certain that very young children and many animals will not be consciously aware of their own mortality. In fact, many individuals can remember quite clearly the first time that they learnt about death and that *they* in particular were going to die. However, neither animals nor children prior to gaining this knowledge seem to have any difficulty in valuing things quite intensely and pursuing those things. Thus, the mortalists argument that we need to be aware of our own personal finitude in order to value things is patently untrue at least for animals and young children.

There may be a relevant difference between animals or children and immortal beings, though because, in the case of immortals, it is not just that they lack awareness of their actual finitude, but rather that they possess a positive awareness of their *infinitude*. Therefore, perhaps it could be argued that, while we don’t strictly need any conscious awareness of our mortality in order to value things, our capacity to value things *is* completely incompatible with conscious awareness of our *immortality*. In fact, this might make some sense; we mortals may not need to know (in the sense of *really* grasping it) that we are going to die to perceive the objects of our experiences as sometimes scarce or fragile in themselves, and thus to appreciate their value. Yet if we positively grasped that we were *never* going to die, and that we would have an infinite number of opportunities to interact with similar or even identical objects in the future, would that be enough for us to lose our ability to value the objects, experiences, and aims presently in our lives?

In other words, the crucial question, is ‘can we perceive value in things only if we experience them as in some way scarce?’ and, unfortunately for the mortalist, I think the answer is no. For example, consider a well-built house or a sturdy car which never breaks down. It seems perfectly possible that we might perceive these objects as highly valuable. Moreover, not only is this valuation *not* undermined by the resilience of the objects in question, the valuation seems to be specifically *because* of their resilience. Similarly, in the case of the friend who is always there when one needs them, we may value them *because* of their non-scarcity. Of course, the opposite may also hold true on occasions: we may value highly the friend we only see once a year, partly because our time with this person is so rare. However, what is crucial is that this is not always the case; abundance and sturdiness do not always undermine our valuing of something and thus scarcity and fragility are not always necessary.

To explain this, we do not have to reject the earlier premise that we must focus on something to appreciate its value, and even that scarcity can often motivate us to 'wake up' and focus on our experiences. Instead, we simply need to acknowledge that scarcity is clearly not *always* required for such focus or subsequent valuing. Certainly, we can pay *some* attention to things even if they are understood as unbreakable or inexhaustible. Moreover, as I briefly mentioned earlier, the choice to savour a piece of food or any experience can be just that: a choice. We can choose to fully focus our attention on anything we want, regardless of how fragile or rare it might be. Indeed, we can see evidence against the combination of premises 1 and 2 every time we witness someone valuing something in spite of or *because* of its sturdiness or abundance. Just because scarcity and fragility are sometimes sufficient to inspire greater focus and an appreciation of value then, they are clearly not *necessary*.[[58]](#footnote-58) Therefore, one might think that anyone could make the *decision* to pay greater attention to the events of their daily lives and fully experience their goodness, even immortal beings. An immortal might even find themselves better able to make this decision given, we might hope, their increase in wisdom over time.

Granting this, the valuation argument fails because premise 2 is false. Nevertheless, aside from this, the argument would still fail because premise 3 appears to be false as well. Immortal beings might know that they will have an infinitely long life and an infinite number of future projects and interactions, but that doesn’t mean they will cease to see any of their present experiences or aims as involving any scarcity at all. As Kolodny and others pointed out in 3.2.1, there would actually be plenty of rarity and fragility in the objects of an immortal’s world. For example, the Mona Lisa would fade, the Colosseum would crumble, relationships which they currently value might change or sour, and diamonds would be no less rare. Even if scarcity and fragility were necessary for us to value something, it’s clear there would still be plenty of scarcity and fragility in the lives of immortal beings to inspire valuation.[[59]](#footnote-59)

The most obvious case of scarcity or fragility belongs to those objects which are unique and cannot be replicated. For instance, while it is true that a master could forge a perfect replica of the Mona Lisa, it could never be *the* Mona Lisa. Thus, the Mona Lisa itself should be experienced as equally fragile and rare by both mortals and immortals alike. For some objects of ours, like bars of chocolate or TVs, we might not mind if they were replaced with new objects with identical intrinsic properties, but for other objects, like a valentine’s card or a family heirloom, it is *that* unique object itself which we cherish. Therefore, it simply would not matter if immortal life meant we would eventually come across something outwardly indistinguishable again, there is still only that *one* heirloom, and hence the immortal who it belonged to could still perceive it as being scarce.[[60]](#footnote-60)

As another example, Todd May, in an attempt to show how friendships would be devalued if we were immortal, points out that, “given an infinite amount of time, there would always be the possibility of the same kind of friendship with someone else” (2009, p.63). However, this takes a strange and shallow view of what a friendship is; I don’t just value my friend because they provide me a particular service, which I may or may not be able to find elsewhere; I value my friend because I care about *them* as an individual and the specific relationship that we have. Thus, just because I might be able to find another person in the future who would be as good a friend as my current friend and in the same ways, that does not mean that I would start to see my current friendship as in any way *replaceable*. Moreover, time spent with this individual could still strike me as both scarce and special since, although death could not part us if we were both immortal, we could still fall out or be separated in any number of ways.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Additionally, there are other objects or experiences which it may be impossible to replicate even in the sense of a Mona Lisa forgery. For instance, in the case of a massive galactic event like watching a particular star go supernova, immortals would likely only get one chance to see it. In such instances, immortal beings would have no reason not to perceive these experiences as being essentially unique and therefore scarce. There is also the possibility that certain activities or objects could be replicated but *will* not be through our own choice, perhaps even self-consciously to *keep* them special.

Finally, one might also point out that, even if a particular event or object could be recreated and re-experienced an infinite number of times in the future, that doesn’t mean that it would be completely abundant or accessible. True, an immortal might know there will always be more wine to be enjoyed in the future, but it does not stop the bottle in front of them becoming empty if drunk. Even if the wine could be reproduced perfectly, there would still be some scarcity about *this* experience of *this* bottle. Similarly, even granting an immortal could watch Halley’s Comet pass overhead a potentially infinite number of times, they would still have to wait 75 years between each sighting. Therefore, acknowledging that scarcity is not just constituted by how much of something there is, or how long it will be around for, but also how *accessible* it is, then it seems like events like Halley’s Comet visiting or a simple glass of wine could still have a kind of scarcity for immortal beings.

In conclusion, there seems to be plenty of reasons for thinking that immortal beings would continue to see the contents of their lives as being valuable. Even if we assume that we must perceive something as scarce or fragile in some way in order to value it, there will be plenty of scarcity and fragility in the lives of immortal beings: in objects or experiences which are themselves unique and irreplaceable (like friends or works of art); in objects or experiences which cannot be replicated for other reasons, perhaps because that would be too challenging (like a supernova, but possibly also many smaller-scale things); and in objects or experiences which can be replicated, but are still not completely accessible, either because they require money or effort to be expended to acquire them (like a glass of wine or the feeling of scaling a mountain), or simply because they only come around so often (like Halley’s Comet or the Olympic Games). Furthermore, even if none of these kinds of scarcity existed in an immortal’s world, it is still conceivable that they could find value in their lives by simply *choosing* to pay attention to the objects of their experiences and aims, and thereby appreciating the positive qualities of these things.

Finally, even if the knowledge that our future opportunities would be infinitely many would cause a *dulling* of our capacity to value things, so we appreciate the value of things less or less often, I see no reason to think this effect would be so strong as to lead to total apathy and motivational collapse. Though I might enjoy a bottle of wine *more* if I knew that I would never drink another glass of wine again, knowing that there would *always* be the opportunity for more wine in the future would not be enough reason to abandon it altogether. Immortals might feel the value of things less intensely from time to time, therefore, but they will still feel the value of things to some extent, and we have no reason to think this wouldn’t be enough for them to live shapely, purposeful lives. In short, the valuation argument fails; we have still seen no reason to think immortal beings could not satisfy the purposefulness requirement for meaningfulness.

3.4 The boredom argument

The final mortalist argument which I will consider in this chapter is presented succinctly by Bortolotti and Nagasawa:

“More recent attacks on the desirability of immortality... articulate the thought... that an indefinitely long life would lack *meaning*. This lack of meaning would be due to the detachment and emptiness caused by repetitive experiences in the absence of interests to satisfy and goals to attain.” (Bortolotti and Nagasawa, 2009, p.262)

In other words, the worry is that, if we lived long enough, our lives would become plagued by a kind of intense or pervasive *boredom*. Nevertheless, an experience of boredom itself would not necessarily be enough to entail that one’s life was meaningless. As Thaddeus Metz notes, someone could live an intuitively meaningful life despite being bored throughout it (2013, p.135).[[62]](#footnote-62) Rather, the only kind of boredom that would entail meaninglessness, as Metz again acknowledges, would be a boredom so forceful that it effectively made us “incapable of constructive action” (p.135). In such a case, we can see that this boredom would be a problem in the same way a potential lack of motivation or valuation were also problems: because it would empty our lives of any *purposeful activity*.

The basic boredom argument could be stated as follows:

1. An immortal would eventually become bored by everything.
2. A being who is bored by everything will do nothing.
3. Purposeful activity is required for meaningfulness.
4. Immortal beings would have meaningless lives.

3.1 Content boredom

There are a few different ways one might understand the concept of boredom, however, and it is not clear which one the argument trades on. I will begin by discussing the kind of boredom which Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin label as ‘content boredom’ (2014, p.361), before moving on to see how other varieties fare. Content boredom, according to Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin is essentially the state of a being who has no ongoing goals or hobbies that they can pursue. A person who is content bored may still have interests and desires and motivation in a general sense, but will have simply run out of suitable projects to engage with, and so perceives the world as boring because it holds nothing for them.

It is this kind of boredom which Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin believe is at the heart of Bernard Williams’ (1973) well-known version of the boredom argument. Williams illustrates his argument by describing an opera by Karel Čapek called *The Makropulos Case*. In this play a character called Elina Makropulos (and certain other pseudonyms with the initials EM) discovers a potion which gives her a kind of medical immortality in that it could freeze her eternally at the age of 42, provided she kept drinking it. However, the play ends when, after living over three hundred years, EM chooses not to take the potion again and, therefore, to die. The justification for this action, according to Williams, was simply that she had become tired of her life and all it seemed to offer and thus suffered from *boredom*:

“a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or, rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to one woman of a certain character” (Williams, 1973, p.338).

Specifically, according to Williams, EM pursued the kinds of activities which interested her for a time, but eventually reached a point where there was nothing new that appealed to her interests or struck her as worth doing, and this content boredom, as we might call it, made suicide appear as her best option. Nevertheless, Williams’ claim is not just that content boredom afflicted EM, but that such a state of boredom would be inevitable for *any* immortal being, once they lived long enough. His justification for this is simple: any person with a fixed character (i.e. a stable personality, values, and interests) will have a fixed list of projects they wish to pursue. Thus, given enough time spent pursuing those projects, eventually they will all have been satisfied or completed, leaving the person trapped (if we are talking about necessary immortality) in an existence with nothing else they care to do. Williams then concludes that “Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless” (p.331), and if purposeful activity is indeed a core aspect of meaningfulness, we can see why.

Nevertheless, a fairly obvious strategy for evading this content boredom may present itself. Essentially, if one could simply change one's character so that new desires and interests would surface, then this might provide a possible escape from content boredom because there would now be new activities and experiences which struck one as worth pursuing. In other words, one might be able to keep oneself from reaching the end of one’s to-do list of projects – and thereby stave off a bare and purposeless life – if one found a way to keep adding new projects to that list.

Williams rejects this suggestion, however. He argues that the kind of personality changes that would be required to allow an individual to continually develop new desires in this way would be so drastic as to effectively constitute a change in their *identity* (p.340-1), and this would bebecause, as Fischer expresses the worry, “it is unclear that there is the appropriate relationship between the individual's current character and future goals, values, and interests” (2009, p.89). In other words, the person living the life at the start would no longer be able to identify themselves with the person living it in the future in the sense of caring (first-personally) what happens to them or if they get what they want. According to Williams, someone could only avoid the boredom threatened by endless life if they became an entirely different person on a somewhat regular basis. Aaron Smuts sums up the problem as follows:

“if we imagine a form of existence where our current set of categorical desires is completely replaced by another set, we have little reason to think that the result would be the same person. Our categorical desires are not only what provide meaning to our lives, they also make us who we are. If they were replaced, our identity as a person would be replaced as well.” (Smuts, 2011, p.136-137)[[63]](#footnote-63)

If these claims about personal identity and immortality are true, then such an existence may be incompatible with *our* living an endlessly meaningful life at the very least, since either one’s life would become meaningless because it would be plagued by content boredom, or it would simply cease to be, and become someone else’s life instead.

Nevertheless, most theorists responding to Williams’ paper reject his identity conditions as being unnecessarily stringent. In short, Williams’ theory suggests that the person I would have to become to stave off boredom in an immortal life would be so different to me that I could not see myself *as* them, nor care about how well things go for them. However, it is not at all obvious why a change in our personalities or what we value or desire, even a drastic one, should necessarily constitute a change in identity.[[64]](#footnote-64) As Fischer points out, our values, personalities, and categorical desires often change drastically even in our mortal lifetimes (2009, p.90). Yet, I can still recognise myself *as* myself when I was a teenager, and will be able to do so as a pensioner, even though my character might be completely different at each point in time.[[65]](#footnote-65)

So, it seems as though a change in our character, if it does happen, would not mean a problematic change of *identity* (at least using the conception of personal identity which we intuitively employ in everyday mortal lives). Provided it happens naturally, Fischer argues, a change in one's attitudes, desires, and values is perfectly acceptable and consistent with the continuity of one’s sense of self (2009, p.89). Scarre (2007, p.57) and Quigley and Harris (2009, p.75) agree here and the latter go as far as suggesting that, in fact, “It is the development of oneself as a person that makes any future life, finite or not, seem enticing” (p.76). So, it may even be possible to see this development of our character and values as not just unproblematic, but an actively positive feature of immortality.

Granting that a change in one’s character would not mean a change in one’s identity and, for now, that changing one’s character in this way would be an effective strategy for avoiding the boredom threatened by endless life, there may still be an issue with this recommendation: essentially, why think that we *would* be able to change our characters in this way? The possibility of simply *willing* a change in character may seem implausible. What we perhaps need to rely on, therefore, is the potential for our personalities to change *organically* as a result of, for instance, openness and reflection on our changing circumstances. The issue with this hope, however, is that not everyone would accept that immortal life provides the right context in which this could happen. For instance, Scheffler observes that:

“we understand a human life as having stages, beginning with birth and ending with death, and that we understand each of these stages as having its characteristic tasks, challenges, and potential rewards” (Scheffler, 2013, p.96).

Scheffler then continues to argue that our own characters develop through life only because we pass through these different stages and because we have an awareness of the norms of what individuals in these different stages typically find valuable and interesting. For instance, what we would think of as an appropriate pursuit for a child or teenager would not necessarily be seen as appropriate for a middle-aged person or a pensioner. Thus, our characters evolve due to the influence of these social norms which tell us what a person in our particular life-stage really *ought* to be concerned with. However, Scheffler argues that an immortal life would not be able to have such life-stages and thus they would drift free of this concern-structuring framework. Furthermore, for our purposes here, we could also imagine that an immortal being’s character would never *evolve* in any way, because they would experience no external life-stage related pressure to do so. In such a case, we would not be able to escape boredom by adding new desires or goals to our list because our personality would be stagnant.

This is an interesting argument, and I accept that life-stages likely play an important role in determining our beliefs about the appropriateness of different concerns and pursuits throughout our lives. Nevertheless, I am sceptical they are so crucial that their removal would mean the stagnation of our characters entirely. Even if I was the only immortal left, living completely independently of any society, it seems unreasonable to assume that my interests would never change, not even after thousands of years of new experiences and lessons learnt. Who we are – in terms of our values and concerns – is surely not just influenced by whether we consider ourselves a teenager or a young-adult, but by our accumulation of memories and achievements. Thus, as long as an immortal kept doing things and having things happen to them, or perhaps even just *observing* other things happening, it seems we could expect their characters to change. As Kolodny puts it, immortal lives could indeed “involve a progression through stages” it's just that there would be infinitely many of them (2013, p.166).

To summarise this section so far, if the number of distinct projects and experiences for us to pursue were genuinely infinite, as some think,[[66]](#footnote-66) and if it were possible for immortal beings to continuously develop new interests eternally, then it may seem as though they would be able to avoid content boredom and purposelessness forever. Nevertheless, what if there aren’t an infinite number of distinct projects to pursue, or what if our ability to perpetually develop our characters is limited? Even in this eventuality, I believe that content boredom could be avoidable provided we grant the possibility of ‘inexhaustible’ projects and/or repeatable desires.

What is an inexhaustible project? Simply put, it is a project that can never be completed. So far, we have been perhaps implicitly assuming that the desires which human beings can *purposefully* pursue always take the form of projects which, after a finite length of time, are either satisfied or failed and then cannot be worked at any longer. However, it seems conceivable that there might be some projects which do not take this form but are *inexhaustible* or, as Neil Levy calls them, ‘open-ended’ (2005). Such projects are, stipulatively, those which could be pursued *endlessly* without ever reaching a point of self-exhausting failure or success.[[67]](#footnote-67) In fact, perhaps 'projects' would be the wrong name for such opportunities, since that perhaps implies something finite and self-exhausting.[[68]](#footnote-68) Instead, if we imagine that purposeful activity can just be a kind of ongoing activity, with no end necessarily in sight, the worry posed by infinite time seems to be disarmed.

Nevertheless, are there such infinite sources of purposeful activity? Chappell believes there are, and gives as examples: “The goods that are most central to human life—the enjoyment and practice of art, friendship and love, the contemplation of beauty, the practice of inquiry and discovery” (2007, p.42). Similarly, Levy has suggested that one can see activities such as the pursuit of abstract concepts like creativity or justice as open-ended in a sense, since they have no clearly defined goals or success conditions (2005). Many of these examples make sense. For instance; Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin argue that there can be something enjoyable about returning to a novel even if we have read it many times before (2014, p.359). While some people might think that there will come a point when one will have 'gotten everything there is to get' out of a particular book, they argue that “this is an unduly narrow conception of what we derive from appreciating a novel or a work of art. The experience cannot be reduced to an insight or piece of information. The experience itself may be valuable, and this value may be inexhaustible” (p.359).

Senyo Whyte also gives some examples of allegedly inexhaustible activities (which he describes as ‘self-renewing’ and stemming from ‘perennial’ desires); for instance, “love of one’s spouse, one’s desire to commune with nature, to better the lives of others, or to write poetry” (2012, p.492). Furthermore, he notes, the fact that we can never permanently fulfil these desires does not frustrate us. In fact, the fact that they replenish themselves is something we actually find attractive. For example, with regard to *writing* novels now, Whyte argues that whether this is a 'perennial' desire or not will depend on our underlying motivations; if I only want to write a hit novel, then my desire will disappear once I have succeeded, but if I instead write just for the love of writing, then this desire might be something I can pursue endlessly (p.493).[[69]](#footnote-69) The same may be true for other simple hobbies like practicing the guitar. This could be seen as an inexhaustible project so long as the reason we pursue it is not to reach some particular level of mastery, but merely to enjoy improving and enjoy the music we create along the way. Thus, there is no obvious reason why practicing playing the guitar is an activity that one could ‘run out’ of, even after many years.

Another example given by both Whyte and Chappell – friendship and love – also seems to be a particularly strong case of an inexhaustible project. As Whyte puts it, “It would be odd to say that I have “succeeded” in loving someone, because truly satisfying this desire involves an ongoing process of not falling out of love with that person” (p.493). A friendship or loving relationship can end in failure, of course, but it cannot end in success; its success is constituted by its indefinite continuation. Some may doubt that it would be possible for any relationship to continue eternally – as Cave claims that “we will one day – even if a million years hence – tire of all our friends' jokes” (2012, p.282) – but this would be another rather narrow-minded way of characterising a friendship. There is certainly more to friendships than swapping jokes, regardless of what Cave intended to suggest. Whyte agrees, and asserts that our loving relationships can be endlessly rewarding, reporting that, “My love for my wife has myriad manifestations” and, therefore, “the profundity and repeatability of these desires makes their repeated indulgence over an eternity quite conceivable” (2012, p.493). Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin also hold up friendship and love as potentially inexhaustible projects:

“Would it not it be weird to say, “I’ve had many, many friends. I’ve gotten what there is to get out of them. Isn’t there anything new?” ... The richness, beauty, and meaningfulness of friendships and deep personal relationships cannot be reduced to factors that can “run out,” as it were” (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2014, p.359-360).

Although Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin count this case alongside their novel-writing example discussed earlier, I think it is of a much stronger class of inexhaustible projects. This is because the attractiveness of something like novel-writing does seem to be tied, to at least *some* degree, to what is *produced* by the work (e.g. the novel); however, since we are imagining there is a finite limit on the number of things that can be produced here, the potential for such an activity to remain appealing is perhaps also partly limited. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of engaging in a loving relationship is not chiefly tied to what is 'produced' by the relationship in any typical sense of the word. Relationships can be rewarding for both parties even when they 'produce' nothing: a day spent simply wasting time with a friend can be desirable in virtue perhaps of the bond between the two that is being continually built, strengthened, or made richer. Furthermore, the drawn-out nature of an immortal life is not in itself a problem for relationships because it is often precisely the *duration* of a particular relationship that can make spending time with that person so appealing.

Another kind of activity open to those who find they have run out of *new* projects to pursue, is the possibility of *repeatable* desires. In other words, simply repeating those pursuits in life that we found most enjoyable, again and again, forever. For instance, Chappell mentions re-listening to his favourite Bob Dylan song: “That song does not bore me just because hearing it again is repetition” (2007, p.40). Similarly, Corliss Lamont observes that “Pure, cool water is the best drink in the world, and I have been drinking it for sixty-two years” (1965, p.33). The idea here is that just because an immortal being might run out of new things to do, they needn’t run out of *things to do*, because they can simply return to those activities they’d already completed and enjoy them all over again. Both Lamont (1965, p.33) and Fischer (2009, p.85) make this claim, and list, as particularly good examples of such activities, those which relate to our bodily drives, such as sex, eating, and drinking. These are not ‘self-exhausting’ desires, Fischer points out, because our desire for them returns again and again, seemingly no matter how many times we indulge it (p.84).

To conclude here, the worry was that immortal beings would inevitably suffer from content boredom – i.e. running out of goals or projects they cared to work on – given a long enough life. Nevertheless, we have seen a few potential solutions to this problem. First, immortal beings could allow or positively try to develop their personalities so that, open to new possibilities, they found new desires and interests to pursue. Second, if this development ever came to a halt, or the universe itself ran dry of brand new projects to pursue, immortal beings could focus their attention on satisfying repeatable pleasures or working at inexhaustible projects. In each case, the life needn’t become boring or absent of purposeful activity because we could always find more to do that appealed to our existing interests. Nevertheless, there are some who would argue that the latter kind of life described would face a different kind of boredom given long enough: situational boredom. I will discuss this in the next section.

3.4.2 Situational boredom

As noted above, one proffered solution to content boredom was to simply indulge in inexhaustible projects or repeatable pleasures. Yet, Preston and Dixon, for instance, worry whether repetition of anything would get boring itself after a sufficient time (2007, p.108). Similarly, Cave rejects the idea that repeatable pleasures could save an immortal life from becoming boring, asserting:

“Of course there are some pleasures we enjoy more than once. A good meal or conversation with friends or taking part in a favourite sport or hearing a favourite piece of music – these things seem at least as good the second, third or hundredth time. But a man who eats caviar every day will grow sick of it eventually” (Cave, 2012, p.282).

We may also be wary of accepting the various allegedly inexhaustible projects mentioned above. For instance, is it really conceivable that friends and romantic partners might find their relationships a source of *eternally* appealing activity? Since it is certainly possible to become *bored* with our friends or romantic partners, even in mortal life, is it not incredibly likely that such boredom will creep up on every relationship given an infinite amount of time? One way to counteract this boredom, if it is inevitable, might be to point out that we do not need to remain in relationships with the *same* people for eternity. Perhaps the multitude of other beings we can befriend or romance might solve the problem. However, if there are a finite number of others and their own characters and personalities have only finite variations, this may again only serve to *postpone* the boredom.

Intellectual inquiry, friendships, guitar-playing, and novel-reading may remain fun for a long time and provide us with a *nearly* endless source of purposeful activity. Nevertheless, the worry remains that they may not be able to capture our interest for an *infinite* amount of time. The boredom that might arise here is different to the content boredom discussed earlier, which was simply the state of having run out of projects or goals that connected to one’s interests. This boredom, which Bortolotti and Nagasawa call ‘situational boredom’, is instead “characterised as a state of relatively low arousal which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating situation” (2009, p.268). In other words, a person is situationally bored not when they run out of goals which appeal to their desires, but rather when the pursuits they are actually engaged with and which do appeal to their desires become less and less enjoyable, and one reason this can happen is because the life lacks sufficient variety. As Bortolotti and Nagasawa put it:

“A common case of situational boredom is when the subject is bored with something specific, i.e. an experience or an activity that might also have been regarded by the subject as very pleasant to start with, but is then perceived as boring because it has been repeated too many times.” (Bortolotti and Nagasawa, 2009, p.268)

Considering the kind of life described above involves essentially nothing but work on the same inexhaustible projects and satisfaction of the same repeatable desires, it makes sense to worry it could lead to situational boredom. However, there are two responses the mortalists’ opponent could make here. One is to argue that situational boredom would not be inevitable, even in the situation under discussion. The other is to argue that, even if a life suffered bouts of situational boredom, this would not actually pose a critical problem for the life’s purposefulness or meaningfulness. I will start with the latter.

The claim that situational boredom could be compatible with an overall meaningful life may sound odd. However, it seems to follow provided we accept Bortolotti and Nagasawa’s evidence-informed appraisal of different kinds of boredom. Specifically, they argue that there are some sorts of boredom which do seem to lead to “lack of involvement and… low interest in one’s present and future life” (p.268); however, situational boredom is *not* one of those kinds of boredom. Situational boredom causes a person to derive less enjoyment from their pursuits than otherwise, and so it may not be a pleasant state to be in, but crucially, Bortolotti and Nagasawa note, it does not seem to be necessarily related to purposelessness or lethargy.

Thus, in the eventuality that there are only a finite number of new projects to engage with, it may transpire that immortal beings are at risk of suffering from periods of situational boredom, and perhaps even lengthy ones. Nevertheless, while they may feel less engaged with their activities, experiencing this situational boredom is unlikely to inspire them to stop *all* purposeful activity, since this would presumably leave their lives even *more* situationally boring than before. The best remedy for situational boredom, one might think, would actually be to try to do *more* rather than less. Thus, if what we’re worried about is precisely immortal beings becoming so bored that they are incapable of purposeful action, it is not situational boredom we need to be primarily wary of.

Given situational boredom itself does not appear too threatening to meaningfulness, the boredom argument is once again defused. Nevertheless, if the above thought about situational boredom being compatible with purposefulness is not convincing, it is also possible to argue that immortal life, even of the repetitive kind described above, would not necessarily succumb to situational boredom. Specifically, those who defend the solution of repeatable pleasures typically respond to these worries by pointing out that any one activity might get boring if it were repeated over and over, but that a *combination* of pastimes and projects (as we have in mortal life), might plausibly stay entertaining forever (e.g. Chappell, 2007, p.40). For example, it is perhaps true that we would tire of eating caviar if that is all we did; however, if a life involved not just a mixture of different culinary experiences, but a variety of other repeated activities as well, perhaps that could stave off situational boredom indefinitely.

To assess this possibility, it would be useful to know precisely what causes us to lose interest in repeatable desires if and when that does happen. Arguably, I think the most common case is because we simply engaged with the activity too much and too often, and this perhaps suggests that repeatable desires need to be left unsatisfied for a sufficient period in order for them to return to us. If this theory is correct, then it would appear to support Chappell’s claim above. While caviar could not be enjoyed every day without cloying, if we only ate it once a year or once a decade, it could perhaps remain enjoyable indefinitely; we would simply need to discover the correct length of time to wait in between each repetition. Furthermore, so long as we similarly schedule the rest of our meals around such a timetable, every meal could continue to be a source of anticipation and pleasure, even endlessly – not to mention the other inexhaustible projects and repeatable pleasures besides food that we could add into our rotation. Indeed, a thought like this seems to be what inspires Lamont to write:

“it seems to me, that while constant repetition of the identical experience may well cause boredom, a repeated cycle of variety does not have the same effect. Characteristic human activities such as eating, traveling, making love, writing books, reading books, going to plays and concerts, painting pictures, dancing, working creatively, and exercising in the open air can be carried on in patterns of variety that seldom give rise to monotony.” (Lamont, 1965, p.33)[[70]](#footnote-70)

In a perfect arrangement of inexhaustible and repeatable activities such as this, I believe that situational boredom may be avoided altogether. Nevertheless, to the extent there remain worries about such situational boredom creeping back in and perhaps even affecting our drive to continue actually *leading* our lives purposefully, there is one final point we can make – an observation which indicates an immortal’s chances of developing situational boredom are likely far smaller than previously assumed. The key idea here can be drawn from a passage from Preston and Dixon, where they suggest that immortal life need not get tiresome because, for instance:

“Will there not always be something to read? After all, writers keep writing, and how many of us have an eidetic memory such that we can never enjoy a book again, once read, no matter how long ago? Given an imperfect memory, and sufficient time between readings, “old” books should seem like new.” (Preston and Dixon, 2007, p.108)

Here we might find a deeper explanation for why it was that caviar cloyed when we ate it too often: because we still *remembered* too precisely the experience of eating it. Thus, all that would be required to desire and enjoy caviar again is that we wait long enough to have, at least to some degree, forgotten what caviar tastes like. The same explanation could be applied to other activities too; for instance, perhaps the reason I enjoy reading my favourite book once every two or three years is because that is how long it takes for me to forget *exactly* what happens to a sufficient extent that re-reading it would give me a comparable pleasure to reading it for the first time.[[71]](#footnote-71)

This notion of our memory being tied to our ability to replenish certain desires may thus provide a strategy for avoiding situational boredom as immortals, or rather an explanation as to why this boredom *would* be avoided: Assuming that our memory will not be affected when we become immortal, one could expect that, once we have finished our grand circuit of repeatable pursuits, it will have taken so long that we no longer remember doing the ones we started with (or perhaps, only *vaguely* remember them), and hence we can continue repeating these pursuits forever, without it ever becoming stale. As Cave expresses the thought:

“perhaps by the time we have seen all the interesting places there are to see and tried all the delicious dishes or studied all the subjects under the sun we will have forgotten what the first most interesting place was like, or how caviar tastes, or the finer points of quantum physics, and so will be able to begin the whole journey once again.” (Cave, 2012, p.284)

Furthermore, if we are assuming that our memories are lost and replaced gradually and not in large chunks or even in one go, then there should be no significant problem posed for our personal identities, since this same process does in fact occur over the course of our normal mortal lives, without apparently causing any substantial issues for lay-people.

It is true that this perpetual-forgetting ‘solution’ would perhaps strike some people as hollow because it would only contain the illusion of novelty and a personal trajectory.[[72]](#footnote-72) My own amalgam theory of meaningfulness did not include any explicit mention of novelty or self-development, however, so how can we explain the intuition that there is something less than ideally meaningful about this endlessly forgetful lifestyle? I think the right way to explain the intuition is by relating it to significance, which *was* one of the three key facets of meaningfulness I picked out. Reconsidering the forgetful immortal life, it does now seem as though an existence which merely involves practicing the same hobbies, spending time with the same friends, and repeating the same activities and projects, might well be an enjoyable and purposeful one, but perhaps not a *significant* one. In this life, even if one pursues large achievements rather than minor pleasures, the result will still be insignificant because, in the end, one will simply be repeating the achievements of the past.[[73]](#footnote-73)

This worry about the potential for an immortal life to be or end up insignificant is one I will save for the next chapter, where significance will be my main topic of discussion. For now though, it is necessary to point out that while this worry about the value of repeated achievements does pose a potential problem for the significance of an immortal’s actions, it does not seem to pose a problem for the *purposefulness* of their actions, and that is specifically the facet of meaningfulness this chapter was aimed at examining. My aim in this section in particular was to assess the worry that immortal life would become empty of purposeful activity on the grounds that it would become *situationally* boring, and the forgetfulness solution addresses that problem; although the forgetful immortal being might end up with an insignificant life (this remains to be seen), it would not end up purposeless, because our inability to retain perfect memories of our experiences forever would ensure that our desires to do various things would eventually be replenished. Moreover, even if some situational boredom did arise, I have argued in line with Bortolotti and Nagasawa that this needn’t be seen as an obvious threat to our motivational drive. Rather the desire to avoid boredom may even push us to do even *more* things of greater variety than before.

3.4.3 Habitual boredom

Regardless of whether or not situational boredom would necessarily arise for immortal beings, I have argued that it needn’t pose a problem for the purposefulness or meaningfulness of their lives. Yet, there is another kind of boredom, which Bortolotti and Nagasawa call ‘habitual boredom’ (2009, p.268), which they suggest *is* undoubtedly a threat in this way. Essentially, a habitually bored person has simply lost their drive to do *anything*; despite them living in a world where there are new things they can do, and perhaps even seeing these activities as being worth-doing in a sense, due to a kind of universal ennui, they simply cannot bring themselves to interact with them.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Habitual boredom is indeed distinct from both situational boredom and content boredom, but it is worth making it clear exactly how. The first kind of boredom raised, content boredom, was characterised as a state of running out of projects stemming from one’s desires. The content bored individual still has desires, but is bored *with* the universe, in a sense, because the universe has nothing in it for their desires to connect up to. On the other hand, the habitually bored individual is not bored because their world contains no opportunities for their desires to push them towards, but because they have simply *lost their desires*, or perhaps have them, but do not feel like pursuing them any longer.

Next, situational boredom was characterised by a low level of enjoyment in one’s life brought on by excessive repetition or lack of variety in one’s activities. A situationally bored person is thus bored by the specific projects they are working on or experiences they are having because those things are not interesting or surprising enough to them. For someone suffering *habitual* boredom, however, as Bortolotti and Nagasawa put it, “the subject is not bored with something specific, but with life in general” (2009, p.268). In other words, a habitually bored person is not bored because of the specifics of any particular activity, but rather by literally everything out there as a result of some psychologically motivation-dampening state they have found themselves in. Additional variety would thus be no help for the habitually bored person, as it would be for the situationally bored person.

Having established the difference between content boredom (lacking or running out of opportunities to pursue one’s desires), situational boredom (lacking full satisfaction in pursuing one’s desires), and habitual boredom (lacking any motivating desires whatsoever), we can now see that unlike situational boredom, but like content boredom, habitual boredom would indeed be a threat to the purposefulness of one’s life. In fact, it seems inevitable that a person suffering from habitual boredom could not lead an active or purposeful existence. Thus, if we have any reason to think immortal beings would inevitably end up habitually bored, we could conclude that their lives would inevitably end up meaningless as well. Nevertheless, as Bortolotti and Nagasawa explicitly argue, there is no reason to think habitual boredom would be a necessary feature of immortal lives.

The current concern is that a person who lived for a very long time, regularly satisfying their desires over and over again, would eventually get tired of doing anything, to the point of experiencing this detached listlessness we are calling ‘habitual boredom’. However, in light of various psychological theories and studies on boredom,[[75]](#footnote-75) Bortolotti and Nagasawa argue that such a scenario is unlikely. Summarising such research, they suggest that habitual boredom is most often brought on by an individual “never having had any life goal or having stopped pursuing a life goal without attaining it”, rather than from repeatedly fulfilling such goals (2009, p.272). In other words, habitual boredom “arises from the *loss* or *outright absence* of categorical desires rather than from their *satisfaction*” (p.269). So, we might perhaps expect this boredom to arise in some immortals who consistently fail to get what they want, or who never knew what they wanted in the first place, but it does not seem right to suggest it would be a necessary development in *all* immortal lives, especially those successfully devoted to pursuing inexhaustible projects or repeatable pleasures.

Ultimately, Bortolotti and Nagasawa suggest that the primary cause of habitual boredom – which they note can occur even in short, mortal lives (p.270) – is most probably connected to each individual’s own ‘personality traits’ (p.271) or ‘psychological characteristics’ (p.273). Essentially, whether or not we develop habitual boredom is likely to be less about our external circumstances (such as how long we’ve been alive and what projects are available), and more to do with our own psychological makeup and proneness to such feelings.[[76]](#footnote-76) This claim, that one’s propensity to feel this kind of boredom may be mainly dependent on one’s own personality, has also been made elsewhere: for instance, Lamont observes that some people allegedly find themselves bored at twenty-three, while others might live to be ninety and never get tired of life (1965, p.32); Max More asserts that whether we become bored with our surroundings is a choice that is up to us (1996); and Connie Rosati argues (2013a, p.365), with Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin in agreement (2014, p.356), that certain people seem to be almost psychologically incapable of feeling boredom. In conclusion, Bortolotti and Nagasawa affirm “there is no good reason to believe that the immortal life would necessarily be plagued by habitual boredom” (2009, p.277).

It is true, however, that certain immortal beings may become habitually bored, and this would presumably impact upon their ability to live purposeful lives. Nevertheless, there are two replies the mortalists’ opponent can make here. The first is to point out that, since habitual boredom likely results from the person’s prior psychological makeup, there is a good chance they would have been habitually bored, and thus had a purposeless life, whether they were mortal or immortal. Mortality would not necessarily have made their life any more meaningful, therefore, just shorter. Moreover, if the fear is that mortal life would at least allow an *escape* from such a habitually bored life, whilst immortality would ensure one was trapped in it forever, this can also be challenged. Specifically, I don’t think we need to be too worried about this worst-case scenario, chiefly because I don’t see any reason to think that this habitual boredom and purposelessness would necessarily last all that long, let alone *forever*.

To explain, the human mind is a notoriously flexible and adaptable thing, so why should we assume that these individuals could *never* break free from their boredom once it had arisen? Although any immortal may find themselves suffering from this kind of ennui at some point in their infinitely long lives, we have seen no reason to think this state would be permanent. Given enough time – something the immortal has no shortage of – we might reasonably expect that the clouds would lift on their own. Alternatively, this process could be hastened with expert help from psychiatrists or even medication. Indeed, people are regularly helped out of similar states of lethargy or depression in our ordinary mortal lives, and I see no reason to think immortality would be any different. Granting this, immortal beings may go through periods of habitual boredom, but this would presumably be only temporary and would give way to active and enjoyable lifestyles once again. Moreover, even if this habitual boredom returned, as it might arise even for beings who started off with the ‘right’ psychological makeup, we have no reason to think it could not similarly be worked at and overcome, again and again, as it is routinely in mortal life.

In summary, it seems reasonable to conclude that immortality would not cause an *endless* and motivationally devastating boredom in us. Content boredom is a state wherein one has run-through one’s list of desires to satisfy and projects to complete, and would presumably leave us with a purposeless life. Yet, content boredom could be avoided either by being open to new experiences and allowing our character to develop perpetually so that new desires and projects could be added to this list, or by finding repeatable pleasures or inexhaustible projects which can be indulged in eternally.

The next worry was that this repetitive life could lead to situational boredom, which is indeed brought on by a lack of variety in one’s activities. However, since situational boredom is simply a dampening of one’s enjoyment in certain activities which are too often returned to, it seems unlikely that situational boredom would lead to a decrease in purposefulness as this would presumably exacerbate the problem. Rather, a situationally bored person could plausibly become even *more* active as they search for entertainment in new and different activities. Moreover, we also have some reason to think that situational boredom could be indefinitely avoided in immortal lives anyway, provided one constructed the right combination or cycle of activities so that they were spaced-out enough to stay fresh.

Finally, we considered habitual boredom which, unlike situational boredom, was connected to a lack of purposefulness in life. Nevertheless, we saw no reason to think that immortal life would necessarily bring about habitual boredom, since it primarily stems from certain maladapted mental traits which would be in place regardless of the mortality or immortality of the individual. In addition to this, the worry that immortal life would trap habitually bored individuals in an *eternally* boring life appeared to be insufficiently justified when we recalled that, just as on Earth, such immortal beings could recover from this ennui themselves or, if it was particularly severe or prolonged, with the aid of certain medical or psychological professionals.

To conclude, the possibility for endless purposeful activity is present and accessible for immortal beings, at the very least in the form of repeatable pleasures and inexhaustible projects. Moreover, if such repeatable pleasures cease to entertain, and one’s life becomes boring in some way, we have reason to think that these periods of boredom would merely be temporary. The human mind is resilient and, all things considered, we have no reason to think immortals would not be able to bounce back, as mortals can, eliminating the negative thought processes which can give rise to this boredom or setting out to proactively find new things to do, rather than consenting to remain bored and inert forever.

Chapter 3: Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined several arguments for the mortalists’ claim that a life without death would ultimately become empty of purposeful activity and therefore meaningless. In each case, these arguments failed because, although certain of our capacities – e.g. to maintain our motivation, value things, and avoid boredom – might be affected in interesting ways were we to become immortal, the notion that immortality would destroy these capacities entirely was found to be greatly exaggerated. Neither deadlines nor scarcity are actually necessary for us to find things valuable or be motivated to engage with them and, even if they were, immortal life would still possess many kinds of deadlines and scarcity anyway. Equally, the idea that immortal life would become both catastrophically and endlessly boring overlooks the possibility that there may be an infinite number of different activities we could find ourselves taking an interest in and, if there wasn’t, we could still avoid boredom through inexhaustible or repeatable projects and perhaps some acceptable level of forgetfulness. Furthermore, even if situational boredom set in, this should not cause us to stop all purposeful activity (since that would only exacerbate the lack of stimulation which caused the boredom in the first place), and even if habitual boredom set in, we have reason to think it would only be a *temporary* state, not permanent. In conclusion, the notion that immortality would render our lives entirely purposeless is doubtful at best.

4. Immortality and significance

Jake: You're so naïve. To live life, you need problems.

BMO: That's stupid!

(Adventure Time, “Box Prince”, 2013)

In the previous chapter, I argued that we have little reason to think immortality would render our lives meaningless by draining them of purposeful activity. Nevertheless, what about the mortalist suggestion that immortal lives would be meaningless because they would be or become *insignificant*? In the present chapter I will assess four arguments to this effect, claiming, respectively, that immortal life would lack significance because immortal beings would not be able to perform *virtuous* actions (4.1), engage with real *challenges* (4.2), or make *unique* contributions (4.3), or simply because immortal beings would eventually *run out* of significant achievements to accomplish (4.4). As in the previous chapter, I think the first three arguments fail because they either exaggerate the likely differences between mortal and immortal life or exaggerate the importance of their chosen variable for meaningfulness, whereas the final argument ultimately fails because it rests on a doubtful premise about the way significance, and therefore meaningfulness, is calculated.

4.1 The virtue argument

4.2.1 Lack of compassion

In his argument against the desirability of immortal life, Leon Kass notes that the myths of the ancient Greek gods depict them as living “shallow and rather frivolous lives”, absent of the sincerity or depth of feeling of mortals (2001). Similar points are also found in many other discussions. For instance, Martha Nussbaum notes that such deities, as immortals, were presented as lacking empathy and often acting cruelly towards the humans whose lives they toyed with (1994, p.228), and Stephen Cave describes how, “freed from the bonds of mortality, they are fickle and frivolous. They are spectators on a world in which only the mortals can demonstrate heroism or decency” (2012, p.286). The worry indicated in these passages is that there may be something about becoming immortal which, while perhaps not eliminating our ability to care about anything (as the valuation argument wrongly claimed in 3.3), would at least strip away some of the degree to which we care about the welfare of others. In Jorge Luis Borges' short story, *The Immortal*, for another example, Borges describes a race of immortal individuals “who had achieved a perfection of tolerance, almost of disdain” to the extent that, when one of their fellows injures themselves, it takes months for anyone to bother helping them (1949, p.431).

If it is true that immortality would reduce or even eliminate our concern for the suffering of others, this could well be a troubling thought. In section 3.4.1, I described how we do not typically find it too problematic that our personalities and values change over the course of a normal mortal life. Nevertheless, as Geoffrey Scarre writes “there are certain kinds of person I should never want to be” (2007, p.58). Thus, if we had reason to think immortality would change our values in such a way that we lacked any empathy, and felt nothing when confronted by others’ pain, then this is an eventuality which we may want to avoid.

Furthermore, and importantly, if all immortals necessarily lost their virtuous instincts in this sense, it is possible to see this drastically affecting the *meaningfulness* of their lives too. In brief, I have argued that a key feature of any meaningful life is the presence of significance, which we can understand as the magnitude of our life’s accomplishments or our contributions to the world. In addition to this, I noted that the kind of meaningfulness we are typically interested in securing for ourselves requires not just significance but the production of significant *value*. However, if immortal beings no longer feel the need to help others who are in danger, or fight injustices, or even just care for one another, then these sorts of valuable virtue-motivated impacts may disappear entirely. Without pressing too hard on the point at this juncture, we can easily imagine how a life absent of virtuous behaviour could also lack a substantial proportion of the significant and valuable achievements it may otherwise have had. Thus, it may be that immortal beings would not be able to produce *enough* value for their lives to have the kind of meaningfulness we want.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Why think that immortal beings would lose their ability to feel compassion for others though? The only ‘justification’ we have seen so far has come from fictional stories and myths about immortals, but neither Borges nor the ancient Greeks had access to any real immortal beings to study, and hence their guess is as good as ours with regard to what such beings would actually be *like*. Furthermore, it is also worth remembering that both authors were presumably attempting to make a point with their stories: Borges', perhaps, was that we should be careful what we wish for,[[78]](#footnote-78) whilst the ancient Greeks were, presumably, looking for an explanation for the chaotic natural events and the random-seeming twists of fate which occurred in their lives. To this end, what the Greeks required was something ordered enough to *explain* the source and reasons behind these events, and yet *disordered* enough to fit with the unpredictable patterns of life: thus, the Gods *had* to be fickle and frivolous and enjoy meddling carelessly with human affairs, since nothing else would provide a fitting and satisfying account for their observations.

We are still in need of some actual reason or argument as to why immortal beings would universally lose their virtuous qualities then. What aspect of immortal life would supposedly cause this drastic personality change? Why should we not side with the equally plausible-sounding claim that immortal beings would become *more* empathetic, not less, perhaps as a result of the wisdom garnered over their incredibly long lives? One suggestion could be, as I noted in section 3.3, that immortal beings would care less about other immortal beings because they would no longer be fragile or short-lived. This argument grants the relationship between something’s scarcity and the amount we value it and posits that, since other immortal beings, being indestructible and infinitely long-lived, would be about as un-scarce as something could possibly be, they would actually be one of the *least* valued things in an immortal’s life. If this is true, then immortals might care a great deal about Fabergé eggs and other breakable or transient things, but would show little to no concern for their peers, leading to the shallow or frivolous attitudes described above.

This argument could explain why one might believe that immortals would become callous then. However, I don’t think it is correct because most of the same objections previously aimed at the valuation argument could also be levelled at this claim. For instance, even though scarcity sometimes increases our valuation of some things, that doesn’t mean it is *necessary* to value anything. Therefore, just as we could value a dependable car we’ve driven for decades, or the sturdy tree we read under, which might live on for centuries, we could similarly value immortal human beings, who will live for eternity. This is, as I argued in section 3.3, because many of the reasons we have for valuing things come from their inherent qualities, and these alone can be sufficient to spark our concern for something, regardless of whether it is also fragile or fleeting. Thus, if an immortal being comforted me in a time of need, or has a good sense of humour, or introduced me to my wife, these are all reasons I could value that person, regardless of how long they would be around.

Moreover, there would still be forms of scarcity that attach to immortal humans despite their indestructible and infinitely long lives. For instance, it would still be possible to become separated from one’s fellow immortals in all kinds of ways (e.g. if they moved away for a job, went travelling around the world, or if one had an argument with them and fell out etc.). Additionally, it might be that it just isn’t possible to see particular people whenever you want; they might be too busy, or they might simply not want to see you that often. Therefore, even for individuals who you never lost touch with, there could also be scarcity present in how accessible they are to spend time with. In short, if scarcity really was necessary to value other things (though I’ve argued it isn’t), that would still not be enough to entail that immortals would lose sight of the value of other immortals.

4.1.2 Lack of risk

The mortalist could change tack here, however, and press on a different point in support of their conclusion that immortal life would be empty of virtuous activity. Specifically, there is another argument they could employ relating to an alleged connection between the presence of suffering and risk in our lives and their meaningfulness. An early statement of this relationship can be found in Victor Frankl's writing on his experiences during the holocaust:

“If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete” (Frankl, 1946, p.67).

The suffering in human life, Frankl continues, provides us with an opportunity to “add a deeper meaning” to our lives, apparently because it can exist as a kind of challenge for us to respond to with dignity or bravery (p.67). Taking a similar tone, Pedro Tabensky writes:

“Discord expressed in pain, uncertainty and obstacles of all sorts are, in my picture, a necessary feature of the good human life, although more often than not they lead to a fall, and, regularly, to oblivion. To live humanly, I contend, is to live in danger” (Tabensky, 2009, p.41).

Likewise, Samuel Scheffler, asserts that “loss, illness, injury, harm, risk, and danger” play a significant role in “human life, and in our understanding of human life” (2013, p.97).

It is worth clarifying at this point, however, that whether a life may be technically described as 'human' or not may not be entirely relevant to the arguments I am assessing. Timothy Chappell (2008, p.1), Lisa Bortolloti (2010, p.39), and Aaron Smuts (2011, p.135) each note that we might conceptually connect the term 'human' to a life which has features such as suffering and death, but that living a life which can be labelled ‘human’ in this sense is not something we necessarily have to care about. As Bortolotti puts it, “Even granting that the brevity of life is essential to humanity, this counts as an argument against life extension only if we assume that being human is a good thing” (2010, p.39). Similarly, what we actually want to find out here is not whether an immortal life could be 'human', but whether or not it could be *meaningful*. Therefore, when writers such as Kass object that: “to argue that human life would be better without death is, I submit, to argue that human life would be better being something other than human” (2001), to make these claims relevant, we must interpret 'human' here as indicating not merely a definition of what our lives are currently like, but rather the kind of life which could be *meaningful* for us.

Returning to the point at hand, I think the most straightforward way to understand the claim that suffering, threats, and the risk of death in particular, may be necessary for meaningfulness is that they can be seen as necessary features of an environment in which highly valuable *virtuous* achievements can take place. Tabensky sums up the general idea when he notes that:

“Fundamentally, virtues do not exist in a world that does not require them, and a world that requires them is a world very much like our own; a dangerous world, a world of risks where things are fleeting” (Tabensky, 2009, p.47).

In light of this thought, the new problem posed for immortal beings is perhaps not that they wouldn’t *want* to do virtuous things, but that they wouldn’t have the *opportunity*. This may be because, firstly, if everyone was immortal, human beings would be completely indestructible and so there would simply be no occasion for many of the heroic, virtuous accomplishments which typically grant substantial meaningfulness to the lives of mortals. And secondly, even if the opportunity for some of these sorts of accomplishments was still present, they might not be quite as *virtuous* any more given immortals wouldn’t risk as much when taking them on. This could also be seen as constraining the immortal’s capacity to generate value, provided one grants there is some value in the virtuousness of an action itself. In general, we might worry that removing our lives from these circumstances of suffering and danger could remove or diminish what is, for us, a potentially crucial source of significance and therefore meaningfulness: our capacity to perform virtuous acts.

Nussbaum discusses this claim at length, focusing first on the virtue of courage. In essence, she claims that courage consists in “a certain way of acting and reacting in the face of death and the risk of death” (1994, p.227). In other words, truly courageous acts are only those which put the individual’s own life at risk, such as running into a burning building to save a baby. However, she points out that, quite clearly, “A being who cannot take that risk cannot have that virtue” (p.227). Kass echoes this argument; speaking specifically of the ‘nobility’ of bravery, he writes: “for this nobility, vulnerability and mortality are the necessary conditions. [Hence] The immortals cannot be noble” (2001).

If these theorists are correct, then immortal beings would be unable to perform courageous actions and, therefore, unable to generate the kind of value which usually comes with them. Specifically, there are two grounds upon which their ability to be courageous may be constrained. First, something like diving into an icy lake to save a baby may no longer count as ‘brave’ for an immortal, since there would be no risk of the immortal drowning themselves. Second, since the infant would also have been invulnerable to drowning, the actual impact of the achievement seems to be lessened as well. Both changes can be seen as reducing the overall significance or value of the act.

Next, Nussbaum turns her attention to justice. Here she argues that, the most significant reason to be concerned with justice in general (e.g. the distribution of resources, social inequalities, or rights violations etc.) is that *injustice* can sometimes lead to death. Thus, the absence of death as an option for immortal beings would appear to make matters of justice much less urgent. In fact, she goes as far as claiming that “the virtue of justice would become optional or pointless” (1994, p.228). Again then, we can see how immortality could sap our lives of a source of opportunities for significant valuable achievements; given injustices would only be relatively trivial problems, even the largest available victories would still not count for much.

Finally, Nussbaum also talks about how our relationships with others would be different if death were no longer an issue. Without the need to care for one another or depend upon one another for our survival, she reasons, the bonds between friends, parents and children, and even citizens and nations, would lose their significance and take on an “optional, playful character” (p.228). For instance, with parents no longer needing to care for children in their infancy, nor vice versa when the parents became infirm, immortals would lose yet another opportunity to display virtues and make a valuable impact on the lives of those around them.[[79]](#footnote-79) Additionally, Nussbaum points out that the absence of death would mean immortals could also no longer perform that *most significant sacrifice* for those individuals or causes they cared for:

“the component of friendship, love, and love of country that consists in a willingness to give up one's life for the other must be absent as well – indeed, must be completely mysterious and obscure to people whose experience does not contain the sense of mortality” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.227).

To sacrifice one’s life for others is often seen as one of the most significant virtuous acts a person can perform, but for immortals, it would be impossible. Similarly, there are other kinds of sacrifices which immortals would be less able to make. For instance, Cave argues that another virtuous act open to mortals is that of sacrificing our “precious limited time” in the service of our friends or loved ones (2012, p.286). Yet, again, if an immortal being has unlimited time, the virtuousness and thus perhaps the value of their making these sorts of sacrifices could be seen as infinitely diminished. Brooke Alan Trisel reaches the same conclusion; of two people, one immortal and one not, who each devote two years of their time to a noble cause: “Both of their actions are virtuous and meaningful, but, because of our finitude, the actions of the mortal person are more virtuous and meaningful” (2015, p.73).

A strong form of the virtue argument, as I am calling it, can be formalised like this:

1. One cannot obtain a positively significant[[80]](#footnote-80) life without performing virtuous acts.
2. Virtuous acts cannot be performed without the presence of some risk or danger.
3. Immortal life would involve no forms or risk or danger.
4. Immortal beings would be unable to perform any virtuous acts.
5. Immortal lives could not be positively significant.
6. Positive significance is required for meaningfulness.
7. Immortal lives could not be meaningful.

Nevertheless, I think the above argument is quite clearly flawed. Although certain kinds of risk and danger might be required for certain virtuous acts to be possible or remain truly virtuous, there are still many other kinds of valuable virtuous acts that can take place even in a completely safe environment. For instance, the virtues of honesty, integrity, intellectual curiosity, perseverance, and humour, to name only a few, could all be present in immortal lives to the same extent they are in mortal ones. Immortal beings could thus plausibly attempt to gain positively significant lives through focusing on *these* sorts of virtuous accomplishments, such as standing up for what is right against peer pressure, discovering important scientific facts about the world, or even just writing a brilliant joke which provides joy and laughter to anyone who hears it. It is hard to see why a sum of these sorts of virtuous accomplishments could not be enough to render a person’s life significant enough to count as meaningful; Einstein, for instance, is typically seen as having lived a meaningful life because of his purely *intellectual* achievements.

However, even if we imagine that the only source of significance was through the exercise of the few virtues which Nussbaum discussed, it is not true that immortal beings would be unable to possess or demonstrate these virtues, nor generate significant value through doing so. Starting with the fundamental underlying notions of risk and suffering; it is true that an immortal would not be able to risk their *lives*, but *everything else* we hold dear in mortal lives could still be lost, and that provides the conditions for both risk and suffering to be present in an immortal life. For instance, Kolodny points out that immortals still risk the loss of their reputation or honour, they could fail in their projects, they could lose contact with their loved ones, they could lose skills or abilities, they could be trapped or enslaved, they could possibly even experience injury or physical pain, depending on how we imagine immortal life to work (2013, p.167). Similarly, John Fischer points out that, “Even in an immortal life, there could be long stretches of physical and/or emotional disability, depression, anxiety, boredom, loneliness, and so forth” (2006, p.378). Thus, it seems strange to say that an immortal life would be without risk, danger, or potential suffering; of all the bad things which can happen to mortal beings, immortality would only be lacking one of them and, though it is an important one, it is patently not the only one that matters.

Now, connecting these observations to the concept of sacrifice, while we should grant that an immortal would no longer be able to sacrifice their *lives* for the people or causes they love, we can now see that there remains a significant and varied range of things they *can* still sacrifice: their reputation, their relationships, the success of their projects etc. Furthermore, because immortal beings live forever, it seems plausible to me that certain other things they possess, such as their reputation or their abilities, might become *drastically* more important. For instance, a mark on your honour is a bad thing for mortals, but so much worse when it might hang over you for millions of years. Thus, it seems conceivable that there might be things an immortal could sacrifice or risk losing which might be felt as of comparable or even greater value than the life of a mortal being.

Additionally, with regard to Cave's idea that sacrificing our time for another would lose its value, we merely have to refer back to Kamm's earlier point about wasting time in 3.2.2: just because an immortal has an infinite amount of time to give does not mean it does not matter how they give it. If an immortal put their own projects on hold to care for a loved one or help a friend move house, this is still a virtuous and valuable act because they would be doing something other than what they would (perhaps) rather be doing. It is still a genuine sacrifice, even if a little less significant; it is beside the point that this morally laudable choice does not detract from the total number of days they have left because it is taking their *present* days away, which they could have spent elsewhere.

Since we have seen that an immortal being still has much to lose and sacrifice, Nussbaum's comments about bravery also start to deflate. She characterised bravery above as 'acting and reacting in the face of death', but this is needlessly narrow; on any lay-definition, one could be brave in the face of losing potentially *anything* that one values, not just one’s life. In fact, to the extent bravery is related to fear, an immortal might be able to show bravery in the face of anything which frightened them, whether it was rational or not. Furthermore, Trisel points out that an immortal would not be able to make the “ultimate sacrifice” of say, diving on a grenade to save one's fellow soldiers, and concludes that “In a world without death, there would be no ultimate sacrifice” (2015, p.72); however, there would be other kinds of courageous sacrifice, and they could potentially be just as virtuous and valuable since, as I have suggested above, something *else* may rise in significance for immortals to become the *new* 'ultimate sacrifice'.

The same thoughts apply to considerations of justice as well. Although an unjust distribution of resources no longer risks the deaths of those who are unfortunate, this does not mean that justice becomes 'optional or pointless' as Nussbaum claimed. She seems to be assuming that, without death, the only realm for justice to occupy is in trivial matters of fairness like sharing out cake at a party, but this is far from the truth. For instance, though it is strange to imagine, an immortal society could suffer from inequalities along all kinds of lines including health, finance, class, race, gender etc. There could thus be injustices of all kinds and, as Kolodny pointed out, perhaps even slavery. Hence, the absence of death as a risk does not seem to reduce the importance or meaningfulness of tackling injustice all that much.

To summarise this section, it's clear that being immortal would alter the risks present in our lives and the virtues we can demonstrate, probably in more ways than we can imagine; however, as Fischer says, “it is not evident to me that the values in immortal existence would be so radically changed that they would not be recognizably similar to (if not identical to) our current values” (1999, p.791). First of all, we have seen no reason to think that immortal beings would cease to empathise with each other or care about each other’s wellbeing. Second, we have we seen no reason to think that they would lack sufficient *opportunities* to perform the virtuous achievements that they need to render their lives significant and meaningful. They could no longer kill or die for a cause, nor save a life, but they could still accomplish all manner of other virtuous things – things like raising children, creating works of art, and making intellectual discoveries – which, in mortal life, we have no trouble acknowledging are significant. Moreover, immortals would still face serious problems and be vulnerable to serious types of risk; thus, there would also still be plenty of valuable and significant virtuous achievements to pursue in the realms of bravery, love, and justice.

4.2 The challenge argument

The next mortalist argument I will consider hinges on two key premises: first, that the kind of significant achievements which are required for a life to be meaningful must involve the individual overcoming some degree of challenge in order to reach them and, second, that no achievement would actually be challenging for immortal beings to accomplish. I will start by motivating these two claims, before formalising the argument, and then presenting my objections to it. In short, I will demonstrate as before that, while there is *some* truth in these premises, the latter is greatly exaggerated, and this means the argument ultimately collapses.

With regard to the first claim, I have already discussed how a life being significant could be seen as a requirement for it to be meaningful. I have also suggested that, for one’s life to be meaningful in the way we actually desire, this significance may also need to stem from valuable or positive impacts. However, we may also need to stipulate a further requirement to ensure this significance is the right kind to generate meaningfulness: that the positive impacts we are responsible for are made through *challenging* or *difficult* work. This sort of stipulation finds a great deal of support in the literature, for instance: Brogaard and Smith assert that “A meaningful life is a life which consists in your making and realizing what are for you in your particular setting ambitious and difficult plans” (2005, p.446); Thaddeus Metz argues that writing a cheque to Oxfam would not be as meaningful as actually volunteering overseas (2013, p.194); Tabensky claims that “significant goals are just that insofar as their achievement is a kind of victory” (2009, p.47); and Antti Kauppinen writes that “For something to be an accomplishment, reaching it must require the exercise of our capacities, the fuller the exercise the more meaningful the life” (2012, p.361).

I think the popularity of this challenge-requirement is fairly intuitive. For instance, Michael Sigrist proposes that the meaningfulness of an achievement relies on the possibility that we could have *failed* to achieve it (2015, p.100). As an example of this, he asks us to consider the ‘achievement’ of winning a chess game against a computer that was programmed to lose. In such a case, he observes, “that would take all the risk out of playing the game and hence all the meaning as well” (p.100). Trisel illustrates this point with a different example:

“The moonwalk was meaningful, in large part, because it was difficult... If we had been born with the capability to jump to the moon, we could walk on the moon whenever we wanted, but doing so would not be a meaning-enhancing achievement.” (Trisel, 2016, p.16-17)

I am tempted to grant the claim that life could not be ideally significant or meaningful if all of its ‘achievements’ were accomplished through trivial efforts. However, what about the second premise of the challenge argument: that immortal life would involve no challenge? The justification for this claim seems to arise from the premise that immortal beings would have an infinite amount of time to work on any particular project. To some writers, this suggests that immortal beings would therefore be able reach all of their goals through a process akin to mere trial and error. For instance, Borges describes how, for the immortal beings in his story:

“There are no spiritual or intellectual merits. Homer composed the Odyssey; given infinite time, with infinite circumstances and changes, it is impossible that the Odyssey should not be composed at least once” (Borges, 1949, p.432).

In other words, with an infinite amount of time, even an immortal typing *random* keys on a typewriter would be able to write the Odyssey eventually, along with any other great work of fiction or non-fiction. However, there would be something hollow about such an accomplishment. As Smuts interprets him, “Borges’s position is that an important kind of significance would be impossible for immortals—the significance of personal achievement” (2011, p.140). Smuts continues:

“The products of the creative efforts of immortals are not necessarily the result of talent or skill, or “moral or intellectual merits,” or anything else we, rightfully or not, feel pride in. No, immortals can achieve by mere diligence.” (Smuts, 2011, p.140)

Connecting these observations to the other premise just discussed, we could see how this would pose a problem for the meaningfulness of an immortal’s life. If it is necessary to overcome substantial challenge for some impact of your life to count as a genuine achievement, or for it to grant your life the kind of significance that is necessary for it to be meaningful, then immortal beings could not have meaningful lives if all their ‘achievements’ were gained through mere diligence, avoiding any real challenge.[[81]](#footnote-81) Mortal humans, on the other hand, do not have the ability to write novels through trial and error, for instance, but must genuinely overcome obstacles in pursuit of their goals, and this allows their accomplishments and lives to be meaningful.

As Bortolotti summarises: “According to [this] objection to life extension, being constrained as an agent adds to the meaningfulness of human life. Life extension removes constraints, and thus it deprives life of meaning” (2010, p.38). If the most meaningful achievements are only such because we had to overcome large obstacles in our pursuit of them, then removing the significant obstacle of our limited time could potentially sap the meaningfulness from an immortal’s achievements. A nice example of this effect is provided by James Lenman:

“A mortal being who has missed out on some basic good and knows it is made desperate by the loss because he knows there may not be another chance, that you only live so long and get so many shots. That's what makes it so bad when you miss the target. But also what makes it so good when you don't. What's the big deal about hitting the bull's eye when you have a million throws?” (Lenman, 2004, p.328).

In light of the above discussion, the challenge argument, as I am calling it, could be stated as follows:

1. Immortal beings live for an infinite amount of time.
2. Immortal beings would be able to achieve anything through mere diligence.
3. Achieving something through mere diligence is not challenging.
4. Immortal beings would never face any challenge in attaining their goals.
5. A meaningful life requires significance that arises from achieving *challenging* goals.
6. Immortal beings could not have meaningful lives.

There are several problems with this argument, though. First of all, it seems to me that premise 3 is obviously wrong. It is true that achieving something like a bulls-eye is far less challenging if one scores it through throwing an indefinite amount of darts at random, rather than employing some actual skill. However, it is possible to think of many achievements, gained through ‘mere diligence’ or something much like it, which still count as real achievements and still involve a substantial degree of challenge. For instance, consider marathon running. For most people it is not particularly challenging to run forward ten metres, but completing a marathon is seen as an incredibly challenging achievement. Yet, the only relevant difference between the person who finishes a marathon and the person who runs forward ten metres is ‘mere’ diligence or perseverance. Similarly, it is not challenging to avoid speaking for a minute or two, but to maintain a vow of silence for a decade would be an act of diligence that was, again, incredibly challenging.

We can see something like this is true, even in the counter-example of writing a book like the Odyssey by randomly tapping keys at a typewriter. Although it might not be as challenging as becoming a talented writer and writing the book the ‘hard’ way, this ‘easy’ way of doing it is still not without its difficulties. To actually wake up every morning and start randomly tapping away, and to do that for the millions of years the book would take to emerge, would require a considerable amount of dedication and will power. To persevere through to the end, I think, would pose a real challenge and thus constitute a genuine achievement.

Another objection to the challenge argument should now be fairly obvious: the jump between premise 2 and premise 4 is unwarranted. In other words, even assuming it would be possible for an immortal to accomplish anything the ‘easy’ diligence way, that does not mean they could not or would not attempt to accomplish things in more challenging ways. This can be seen clearly in the above example of writing a book like the Odyssey; just because an immortal *could* write a great book like this with random trial and error does not mean they would choose to do so. It would patently be far more interesting and enjoyable to try to write one by researching characters and settings, practicing one’s craft, and becoming a talented enough writer to succeed the old-fashioned way. Moreover, if immortals are aware of the apparent connection between overcoming challenge and meaningfulness, they would have even more incentive not to take the ‘easy’ route but to actually tackle the relevant obstacles between them and their goals head on.

Immortal life could be meaningful if the immortals *chose* to take on challenges it seems, and we have no reason to think they would not, regardless of whether it was always possible to achieve things through diligence alone. Nevertheless, this latter claim, premise 2, is false as well. Immortal beings would not be able to reach *any* goal through mere diligence firstly, because there will be time-constraints in an immortal’s life besides their own lifespan and, secondly, because some goals simply *cannot* be attained through diligence alone (i.e. some degree of skill is absolutely required for success).

The first point is one I have repeated several times already: just because immortals will live for an infinitely long time, that does not mean that everything else in their lives will be eternally present as well. Immortal beings would experience deadlines and temporal scarcity in the objects around them just as mortals do, and this can apply to the completion of their projects as well. As Bortolotti argues:

“Some goals come with their own in-built “expiry date.” For the achievement of these goals, it is irrelevant whether the agent has a longer or shorter life – it is a big deal to hit the bull's-eye, even when you have a million throws, if it matters that you hit it sooner rather than later” (Bortolotti, 2010, p.46).

For instance, even for immortal beings, “There is only one chance to win the 2012 Olympics 100-meter race, or to make a good impression on the first day at work” (2010, p.46). Smuts agrees and adds another group of examples: “Since there is only one chance for historically unique innovation, if one waits too long, one might miss the chance to create something new” (2011, p.143). Even more seriously is the example discussed earlier of saving someone from a burning car-wreck: it will surely *matter* that one does this as soon as possible rather than simply at *some point* in time. Given this, the key point to stress is that, even though immortals would have unlimited time in general, they would not have unlimited *chances* to accomplish every goal they could be interested in accomplishing. Thus, many sorts of achievements would be just as challenging as they are in mortal lives because immortality would have no impact on the number of (consequence free) attempts one gets.

Next, with regard to my second point, it seems there are also many achievements which could not be reached through mere diligence *even if* one had unlimited time to work at them. Smuts, for instance, points out that “in a million years, a million monkeys could not come up with calculus. It is not the kind of thing one could invent by sheer dumb luck or persistent, mindless tinkering” (2011, p.141). This is correct; there is no sense in which completely unchallenging trial and error work could ever result in the invention of something like calculus. Even if one typed out a whole book about calculus through random tapping at a keyboard, this would still not constitute *inventing* calculus, because one would have to recognise what one had actually done. In other words, one would have to have discovered calculus already in order to realise that the last hundred thousand words one typed actually said something significant.

Something similar goes for the challenge of becoming a successful artist; one could diligently paint a million awful pictures and, by chance, one masterpiece, but unless one has some artistic skill, one would have no idea which to submit to the local art gallery. Moreover, no one is going to see someone as a great artist if they have to slog through a million terrible paintings to find the one good one, or read a million books of gibberish to find one decent novel. True, one could be causally responsible for producing a great novel, but in terms of achievements that actually matter to us and would be in any way significant to the world, mere diligence is almost never actually going to be a feasible strategy for success. Take the challenge of building a fulfilling relationship with someone. Even if both were immortal, this is not something that can be accomplished through trial and error, randomly saying and doing things to the person until a deep friendship had been unlocked. Even if an appropriate sequence of actions was reached eventually, this would be too late, because it would presumably come after millennia of erratic and off-putting behaviour.

All of the above makes total sense when we acknowledge, as should have been obvious, that there are other features of projects which render them challenging *besides* the length of time or number of attempts one gets to complete them. Here we could draw a distinction, similar to that in section 3.2 regarding motivation, between the intrinsically and extrinsically challenging aspects of any particular project. An extrinsic challenge to achieving something might be a time-limit on how long we get to work on it, or how many attempts we get, or whether we have to do it blindfolded. The intrinsically challenging features of some project, on the other hand, would be the obstacles and demands which are inherent to the project itself, such as the physical or mental resilience it demands, or the skills or knowledge it requires. Now we can see that inventing calculus in one year would be difficult and it would be difficult partly because of the extrinsic challenge constituted by the imposed deadline. However, even taking the deadline away, we see that project would still be difficult because of the intrinsic challenges it poses, such as the mathematical knowledge and capacity for creative thinking which success would require.

Becoming immortal might take some of the extrinsically challenging features away from many projects then, but it would not take away all of them (there would still be some deadlines etc.), and even when it did, the intrinsically challenging features of many projects would be left more or less untouched. For instance, it would be challenging for an immortal to discover the theory of relativity, just as it was challenging for Einstein. It would also be challenging for an immortal to comfort a friend in need, fight against an injustice, put on a successful play at the local theatre, and so on. There are all kinds of goals which immortals could attain, therefore, which could still count as real meaningfulness-granting *achievements*.

In conclusion, the challenge argument was wrong, and we can now start to see a similarity between the failure of this argument and the virtue argument tackled previously. Both arguments were about how our *limitations –* in the form of danger and risk, or obstacles and challenges – play a role in the meaningfulness of our lives, but both arguments exaggerated the extent to which immortality would lack these limitations.

This claim, that certain limitations are required for meaningfulness, does seem plausible, however. As the epigraph which started this chapter suggested, to truly *live* life (meaningfully) perhaps we really do need problems. To illustrate this, we can consider again Trisel’s example of being able to jump to the moon belittling the achievements of Neil Armstrong. Another example Trisel gives relates to the limitation that human beings experience with regard to our knowledge of the world; if there were nothing we were ignorant about, he observes, there would be nothing to discover or learn, and the lives of the would-be Einstein’s of the world would be empty and meaningless (2016, p.17). Nussbaum similarly points out that, in the case of running as a pastime, it would surely “lose its point” if we could merely “beam ourselves from here to there without effort” (1999, p.812). To that extent, as she concludes elsewhere, a truly “god-like” or *omnipotent* being perhaps would find themselves severely lacking in potentially meaningful activity (1994, p.225).

However, even if we grant that overcoming certain limitations is necessary for life to be significant or meaningful, this does not entail that an immortal life must be meaningless, for temporal finitude is only one of many relevant human limitations. As I have stipulated we understand them, the immortal beings we are discussing would not be ‘god like’; they would be just like us. The only respect in which they would be different would be their longevity and, while this does remove *one* kind of limitation, we have no reason to think it is as special as the mortalists are making out (Trisel, 2015, p.71).[[82]](#footnote-82) Human beings are also limited in our intelligence, our strength, our perception, our focus, our empathy etc. and these limitations can serve just as well in providing immortals with challenges to overcome.

In fact, in a later paper, Nussbaum herself came to see the error in these limitation-based arguments surrounding virtue and challenge, noting that “One can have plenty of striving and effort in an immortal life, provided that some limits are held in place” and that many relevant limits *would* be held in place (2013, p.37). She continues:

“One can imagine an immortal being struggling against all sorts of limits: pain, weakness, the bad conduct of others, poverty, injustice, athletic injury, and so forth. These are limit enough to give the virtues their point.” (Nussbaum, 2013, p.37)

Immortal life would evidently not be absent of challenges to overcome, nor opportunities to demonstrate virtue and produce valuable impacts by helping others. It is likely that many of the problems immortal beings face would be quite different to the problems we face, but there will still *be* problems.

Furthermore, to the extent that immortal life would involve *fewer* limitations than mortal life in the form of risks and obstacles and dangers, it is not at all clear that this would constitute a negative change, even with regard to meaningfulness. This is because, while some limitations might be good in that they provide the opportunity for significant achievements, having too many limitations, or limitations of certain kinds, can actually stifle this work and make it harder to achieve anything. For instance, life in the stone age was almost certainly more challenging, dangerous, and risky for human beings. Yet, it would be controversial to claim that the lives of cavemen were more significant or meaningful; although such cavemen would have the opportunity to commune with nature in a way some contemporary humans long for, they would also have to contend with the difficult, painful, and repetitive toil that is necessitated by their primitive lifestyle. Modern humans, on the other hand, do not have to spend their days scavenging for food (if they are lucky), and are able to concentrate more on the kinds of projects we typically consider to be more significant, such as moral, aesthetic, and intellectual pursuits.

What may be beneficial for meaningfulness, therefore, is not the maximisation of all limitations on our lives, but that we find the right ‘sweet spot’ where life is challenging enough to be lively, but not so challenging that we are unable to accomplish anything substantial. The step from cavemen to modern humans, I think most would agree, was a step closer to this sweet spot. Similarly, it strikes me that the step from mortality to immortality could take us even closer, rather than further away. Immortal life would still have obstacles to overcome in the form of these highly-thought-of moral, aesthetic, and intellectual pursuits, and it would be even further from the often meaningfulness-stifling challenges that can make mortal life so frustrating such as sickness, ageing, and the need to earn a wage to support one’s physical life. To conclude, the reduced limitations which come with immortal life – i.e. the absence of certain dangers and time constraints – would certainly not render it meaning*less*, and may even allow it to become even more meaning*ful*.

4.3 The uniqueness argument

Another quote from Borges' short story may inspire a further worry about the capacity for immortal lives to be significant and meaningful:

“Among the Immortals... every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future” (Borges, 1949, p.434-435).

Observations like the one above then lead Borges' protagonist to assert that, in the city of immortals, “No one is someone; a single immortal man is all men” (p.432). What is meant by this, in essence, is that no immortal being would be in any way special. Unlike in mortal lives, where their shortness and finitude more or less ensures that each individual will stand out as different in at least some respects, the worry is that, since immortal beings live infinitely long, eventually each immortal being will have done and experienced exactly the same things and hence they would end up with completely identical lives. Granting this claim, there would no longer be any way to tell immortals apart with reference to their histories or deeds, and so immortal beings would have lost their uniqueness. Cave sums this problem up nicely:

“Borges' hypothesis is that, given an infinite amount of time, any event with a finite probability would happen. You would inevitably one day be a TV chef, at another time prime minister of Belgium and at some point a stripper in a go-go bar. And possibly all these things many times over. And as all things would happen to all of us, there would be nothing to distinguish us one from another” (Cave, 2012, p.283).

Noonan also makes this same claim:

“it is choice and limitation that constitutes our lives as *individual* and *distinct* contributions to the natural and social worlds that sustain us... if all possibilities for living were open to everyone over an unlimited time frame, and everyone sought to maximise their experiences and activities, the more everyone would tend to become the same.” (Noonan, 2013, p.20)

The worry is that immortal beings would lose their unique identities in the sense of having lives with maximally filled-out and therefore identical packages of experiences and actions. Can this worry be related to the meaningfulness of such lives, though? One claim might be that one’s life can only be meaningful if it has a distinct identifiable ‘meaning’ and that, whatever a ‘meaning’ is supposed to be, immortal lives will simply be too long, convoluted, and busy, to have one. I discuss and reject this argument in 5.4, where I address the charge that immortal lives would be ‘shapeless’.

Another claim might be that one’s life can only be meaningful if it has a meaning which is distinct from everyone else’s. Thus, if the ‘meanings’ of our lives are determined by our actions or primary achievements, then immortals with identical lives would have identical ‘meanings’ and hence no real meaningfulness to speak of. I think we can safely reject this kind of reasoning as well, however. If A and B were the last people alive, and A decided to spend their time meaningfully creating works of art, it would seem absurd to suggest that B could entirely negate the meaningfulness of A’s life merely by choosing to spend their time in the same way. The same is true even if we imagine A and B were the only people who had *ever* lived. Thus, the meaningfulness of one’s life does not, at first glance, appear to rest on the requirement that one’s life has a unique ‘meaning’ distinct from everyone else’s.

Nevertheless, perhaps the worry could be revived by connecting uniqueness to significance, and by assuming that significance is something that can only be measured relative to some global average. That way one’s life could only be counted as significant if it was sufficiently more significant than the average person’s life. Granting this, if all immortals had identical lives, then everyone’s lives would have an average level of significance, and so no one’s life could be counted as significant or meaningful overall.

Indeed, if every human being was exactly the same height, there would seem to be little point in talking about the tallness of different people. Nevertheless, I don’t think we should see significance in this way, as analogous to tallness. Consider two scenarios: in the first, all humanity lives equally ideal lives, free to develop their skills, demonstrate virtues, and produce equally valuable achievements etc. In the second, all humanity is enslaved and forced to perform pointless and arduous tasks until they die. If we see significance as analogous to tallness, then this entails that no one in the latter scenario has a significant life, but that no one in the former does either, since no one’s life diverts at all from the average. However, I think it would be far more natural to say that individuals in the former scenario, unlike the latter, have lives with positive levels of significance that merely happen to be equally high, given the great but equivalent value they produce. In other words, significance appears to be more of an absolute than relative measurement, at least in the way that matters to us, and so should be treated as more analogous to ‘height’ rather than ‘tallness’. Though it is true that no one will be tall in a population with equal height, they all still have some positive height. Similarly, in a population which produces equivalent achievements, they will all still have some positive significance, even if none stand out among the rest.

Are there any other reasons for thinking that immortal lives would be insignificant if they all contained identical projects and achievements? One strategy might hinge on the assumption that, because each person’s life was identical in the way described, their achievements must be *redundant* in some way. For instance, if all immortal beings would have identical lives, this would mean that they would *all* have written the Odyssey at some point or other. However, it seems reasonable to think that, if someone had *already* written the Odyssey, it would not be significant for another person to write it again. Thus, these immortal beings would fail to derive any significance from completing this project, because its significance would have already been claimed, in a sense. Moreover, if immortal lives were identical, such that *all* of their actions were merely copies of actions performed long ago, then it seems *all* their actions will be hollow of any significance.

Nevertheless, the inspiring thought of this argument also undermines it. Specifically, if individuals who write the Odyssey from now on cannot gain significance from that project because it’s significance has already been claimed, then this entails that not *all* writings of the Odyssey were insignificant; specifically, the firstwriting *would* have been significant. Thus, all immortal beings need to do is find things that they can do *first*, and these achievements will still generate some significance for them. Instead of writing the Odyssey, they could simply try and write a different book, or pursue some different kind of work altogether, such as becoming a doctor or a lawyer. Professions like these in particular would be even less prone to accidentally and redundantly replicating past work since, although doctors and lawyers may have been taking on similar cases for a very long time, the work an immortal doctor or lawyer does in their daily lives would involve *new* patients or clients with, at the very least, new *tokens* of the same old problems. Moreover, there would be nothing insignificant about, say, curing a particular person’s condition just because other doctors had cured other patients of the same condition at some point in the past.[[83]](#footnote-83)

The fact that it would be impossible to redundantly cure the same patient of the same condition twice (even if the condition returns, it would not the same *instance* of the same condition), indicates another problem with the basic premise of the uniqueness worry we’ve been considering: that immortal beings would not actually have *completely* identical lives. In these cases, although all immortals may have worked as a doctor or lawyer for some period of time, they will have worked with different clients with different problems at different times. Thus, their lives will not be *identical* even if they have similar packages of experiences.

Furthermore, as I have stressed several times already, just because immortals have unlimited time does not mean unlimited *opportunities* to do anything. There are many things which would remain time-sensitive and hence many things which an immortal could miss out on doing. One example I’ve noted is the chance to be the *first* to do something. Similarly, doing something *while it is needed* (like saving someone from a car wreck), or interacting with something before it is lost or destroyed. Because there are lots of opportunities we can neglect to pursue in an immortal life, there are still many ways our lives could be different. For instance, we might say 'there goes that immortal being who missed out on seeing the Twin Towers because they spent two centuries in bed', or 'there goes the immortal who first wrote the Odyssey’.

Additionally, there are some things we might *never* do simply because of our character or temperament. For instance, if someone has a strongly held belief that eating meat is wrong, then it seems entirely possible to me that they might never purposefully eat meat even with an infinite amount of life. All we need to assume is that their belief is so strongly held that no situation could compel them to eat meat, and that nothing would happen to them to change this attitude, both of which seem conceivable. Such a person would be like a normal 6-sided dice; so long as no one tampers with it, it doesn't matter if one rolled it an infinite number of times, one could not get a 7.

Finally, even if the above weren't true and all immortal beings really would have lives comprised of the same packages of activities and achievements, there would still be ways to differentiate them and thus still ways they could retain their uniqueness (though perhaps in a slightly weaker sense). For instance, even if we had all been all things, each person still has to be *something* at any given point in time. So, while two beings had both been butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers during their lives, only one may *currently* be the butcher, and hence their identity will be distinguishable from the other. Furthermore, for the argument under discussion to work, we have to assume not only that everyone did the same activities, but in the same order, in the same way, and for the same amount of time. Obviously, though, there is no reason to believe this would be the case; there are many other ways we could interact with projects differently even if we all interacted with *all* projects eventually, such as how proficient we were at each project, how much we enjoyed it, how long we spent on it, how many times we repeated it etc.

The increase in opportunities available to us might weaken our sense of uniqueness somewhat, but it would not be enough to render us all identical. Indeed, we may ultimately find it easier to define ourselves in terms of what we *haven't* done or been, rather than in the current mortal way of what we *have* done or been, but there will still be ways to define ourselves apart from the rest. Moreover, this doesn’t seem to pose any obvious problem for significance or meaningfulness. In fact, the initial complaint seems to be inspired by the thought that each immortal would have so many significant achievements and projects that they start to overlap, which perhaps indicates the lives would be *more* significant, not less. We might think that this change in how we distinguish ourselves reflects a positive change from mortality to immortality, therefore: I am no longer limited to just one significant role in my life; I can choose many.

There is perhaps one last way the mortalist might mount an attack here, though. They can admit that there would be enough differences between the lives of immortals that their identities can be rendered distinct, but insist that their overall similarity would still pose a problem for the significance of their lives. Specifically, the fact that they would all have similar experiences and have developed similar skill sets could mean that no immortal’s contribution to any particular project would be irreplaceable. In other words, while immortal beings might accomplish valuable things, any one of them could be substituted for another without affecting the success of the overall project. This could then be seen as threatening the

meaningfulness of their lives provided we grant that the irreplaceability of one’s actions or achievements are directly related to how significant or meaningful they are.

This connection between irreplaceability and meaningfulness has some supporters in the literature. For instance, Frank Martela (2017, p.243) and Antti Kauppinen (2012, p.364) argue that the uniqueness of a person’s contribution to some project (i.e. how much it stems from one’s own personal skills, experiences etc.) is directly related to its meaningfulness. For the latter, this is supposed to be part of the explanation of why working at loving relationships is generally considered to be meaningful, because there is a sense in which no one can take our place in these relationships and fulfil precisely the same role we do (p.364).[[84]](#footnote-84) Similarly, Ben Bramble’s (2015) account holds that one’s life as a whole is made meaningful to the extent one makes the world a better place. However, the only value which counts here, he argues, is that which would not have been made without us. In other words, if I produced some value x but, had I never been born, someone else would have produced value x, then this achievement will not grant my life any additional meaningfulness. Bramble points out that this helps to explain what is so especially meaningless about the life of someone who works on an assembly line; if they had never existed, nothing would change because someone else would have taken their place and produced exactly the same results (p.450).

Nevertheless, despite plausibly explaining the enhanced significance or meaningfulness of engaging in fulfilling personal relationships and the diminished meaningfulness of something like assembly line work, I don’t think it is right to say that an achievement can *only* be significant or meaningful if it could or would not have been accomplished by anyone else.[[85]](#footnote-85) For instance, Purves and Delon (2017) point out that we could imagine a set of parents with two children, A and B, each with very similar interests and skills such that B would have gone on to accomplish exactly the same things as A did, had A never been born. If we hold something like the irreplaceability condition under discussion, then this entails that A’s life would be entirely meaningless no matter how important or successful they were, since their achievements could and would still have been accomplished by B had A never existed or chosen to do otherwise (p.6). This does not appear to be the right result, however. What seems to matter is merely that A was indeed responsible for producing some value in our actual world, and this stands regardless of the skills and abilities of others or counter-factual theorising about what might have happened in close possible worlds.[[86]](#footnote-86) Thus, we should reject the claim that one’s contribution to the world must be irreplaceable if it is to be in any way significant or meaningful.

To conclude this section, it seems that the potential for immortal beings to end up with similar lives should not be too troubling with regard to their meaningfulness. Even if immortal beings all had an identical degree of significance in their lives, and from the same sources, it would entail just that: their lives are significant, they just happen to have the same amount of significance drawn from the same sorts of activities. To suggest otherwise, for instance, that a life can only be significant when it is above average, does not align with our intuitions and desires. Equally, living similar lives does not necessarily mean living lives with *redundant* accomplishments – as I noted in the case of the doctor and lawyer – and especially if immortal beings make an effort to search out *original* work to complete, as we have no reason to doubt they would. Finally, if we reject irreplaceability as a strict requirement for significance or meaningfulness, as I think we should, it would pose no threat to the meaningfulness of immortal beings’ achievements that any other immortal being could potentially have taken their place and performed the same role. Rather what matters is just that the immortal was actually causally responsible for producing some significant valuable effect, and the fact their life-histories would not be hugely different is no obstacle for this whatsoever.

4.4 Running out of significant achievements

4.4.1 Are there infinitely many significant things to do?

In 3.4 I suggested that, even if the number of *original* projects to engage with in the universe was finite, immortal beings could still avoid boredom if they turned their attention to satisfying pleasures that could be repeatedly indulged without growing stale. Fischer, for instance, notes that examples of such pleasures include eating, drinking, and sex (2009, p.84). Nevertheless, while the problem of boredom and *purposefulness* might be addressed with a suitable arrangement of these repeatable pleasures, the problem of keeping an immortal life *significant* might be harder to solve. Smuts, for one, does not seem to think the rather hedonistic lifestyle described above would be very desirable all things considered: “regression into a being concerned primarily with keeping its stomach full and genitals stimulated is not one we should look forward to” (2011, p.135-136). Of course, an immortal could do more than that; for instance, they could also re-visit countries or cities they liked, re-read their favourite books, play sports with their friends etc. However, the worry remains that, while such a life would be purposeful and entertaining, it would not be verymeaningful because it would contain no *significant* work or achievements.

Fischer is aware of this issue, noting that he did not mean, by the above argument, “that all meaningfulness and value in human life, and all reasons to continue to live, can be reduced to pleasures or positive experiences or conditions of the agent” – he just meant to show one way in which immortality could be desirable (Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin, 2014, p.357). However, assuming that merely satisfying one’s own repeatable desires does not constitute the kind of significant achievements which are required for one’s life to be meaningful, the following problem still stands: even if an immortal life could be eternally entertaining and purposeful, how could it be eternally significant?[[87]](#footnote-87)

We might think that eternal significance could only be possible if there truly are *infinitely* many significant projects an immortal could pursue. If there are not, however, once all these projects have been completed, all that would be left would be their repetition which, while potentially enjoyable, would perhaps no longer be significant. For instance, as I noted above, writing the Odyssey seems to be a significant achievement only for the first person who wrote it. Anyone merely copying a past achievement will have produced only redundant effects and thus insufficient impact or value for genuine significance. Similarly, even if something like climbing Mount Everest would be a significant achievement for *each* person who does it, it appears that its significance would be reduced were they to climb it a second time and a third and a fourth... ad infinitum. The present argument can be formulated as follows:

1. There are only finitely many significant projects any person can complete.
2. All projects lose their significance after they have been completed a finite number of times (in many cases, just once).
3. Immortal beings could not keep producing significant achievements eternally.
4. Immortal lives would eventually lose their significance.
5. Significance is necessary for one’s life to be meaningful.
6. Immortal lives could not be meaningful.

A key premise of this argument, as I’ve noted, is the claim that there are only finitely many significant things to do in our universe. Not everyone agrees with such a premise, however. For instance, Chappell argues that “the world is a big place, and the range of worthwhile possible projects and commitments that it might afford us seems – as a matter of common experience – to be indefinitely and incalculably large” (2007, p.37). Mike Perry (2004) and Jeff Noonan (2013) also seem to agree, the latter stating: “No matter how rich and full of life-value a given mortal life is, an infinite set of possibilities will always remain unexplored” (p.19). Nevertheless, are they right to suggest this? Chappell suggests it is a matter of common experience that there would be an endless supply of potentially significant activities for immortals to engage with, but the problem is that immortals’ lives are not just long but *infinite*, and the concept of *infinity* is not a matter of common experience.

It would perhaps be useful to look at some specific *spheres* of significant work in particular. For instance, on the pro-immortality side, Max More claims that “life's possibilities are literally unbounded” and one realm of work he gives as an example is that of scientific inquiry (1996). More states that even if scientists are able to 'complete' physics so that there was nothing new to discover, “we cannot exhaust the technological applications of physical laws. Technological innovation may continue forever.” Similarly bottomless, he asserts, are artistic pursuits such as music, writing, dance, and other art-forms yet to be invented.

Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin echo both these points: that even if we discover the fundamental truths of the universe, there will still be infinitely many 'concrete or applied' truths waiting to be discovered (2014, p.361); and that art, particularly novel-writing, seems to be an endlessly exploitable well of meaningful activity (p.358). They report: “It is frankly bizarre to suppose that humans will ever get to the point where all the novels, or all the interesting novels, or all the novels worth writing will have been written” (p.358). Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin also discuss another example case: curing diseases. They argue that there are an enormous number of diseases and conditions which affect humanity, and also that “new viruses and bacteria are emerging with depressing regularity” (p.357). This leads them to suggest that such medical work could never be completed, and hence this would provide an inexhaustible source of significant and meaningful accomplishments.

However, some of the comments made above may strike one as indicating that these authors have not really understood the *infinite* length of immortality adequately. An infinite life is literally endless, and with endless time and change, it can be argued, there really will come a point when any finite combination of things will have been cycled through – an infinite amount of times in fact. Even though it is 'bizarre' to imagine, if we were so determined, it may indeed be true that there would come a time when, say, every novel worth writing had been written, as would all the poor-quality novels. There is a finite combination of words and letters in the English language; thus, with an infinite amount of time and at least one person working on novel-writing, it may appear inevitable that every possible English-language novel will get written.

Even if we count in all foreign languages or start making up new languages to write in, one might also think there is a finite number of combinations of *ideas* or *stories* to make novels out of. All these things would drastically increase the length of time it would take to exhaust the meta novel-writing project, but it would still be finished eventually. The same might also be said for other forms of art, and those yet to be invented, or with regard to the meta disease-curing project. There are, we might think, a finite number of ways a bacteria or virus can negatively interact with our bodies. Therefore, even if they keep evolving as they are currently, we will eventually reach a point when all human diseases and all cures have developed.

It may seem as though, if our list of potential projects is only finitely long, and each project is completable in a finite length of time, then they *must* run out eventually. Nevertheless, what if we were to try and make the projects we are talking about *themselves* infinitely long-lasting in some way? For instance, if we kept increasing the length of our novels so that each one we write is one word longer than the last, stretching all the way to infinity, then it seems we would never run out of novels to write. So long as there is no upper limit on the length a novel can be, it seems that we might never come to a point when all the novels had been written because there would always be a longer (and therefore *different*) one to follow. The problem with this suggestion is that, if there are a finite number of plotlines and characters, we might then start to see storylines being repeated *within* these infinitely expanding novels. In which case the problem of repeating past achievements crops up again.

Problems also attach to the somewhat analogous suggestion of trying to keep immortal life full of significant and original achievements by, say, building a series of increasingly large temples or monuments. Although it might be a significant accomplishment, and the project could never strictly repeat itself, since each temple would be larger and therefore different, there is still the issue that we are carrying out this meta temple-building project in a finite universe. Thus, sooner or later, we’re either going to run out of space or building materials to keep going. Moreover, I think equivalent objections would arise for essentially any similar proposal of a meta-project in which the sub-projects trend towards infinite size or length or duration; either they are going to start repeating internally, or they will eventually be constrained by the physical finitude of our universe.

An alternative suggestion might be to include some component of infinity into our projects not by making them indefinitely larger, but by ensuring that there is something exponential about our progress with them, such that it gradually takes larger and larger efforts to make smaller and smaller effects. For instance, imagine that the healthiness of a population is measured on a scale between 0% and 100%. Perhaps it could take one hundred years of work to attain a 90% health level in this population, but 1000 years to reach 95%, and 10,000 years to reach 97.5% etc. In this case, we can aim for the population to be 100% healthy, but our work will never be finished because we will only get closer and closer to 100%, but never quite reach it. The issue with proposals like this, however, aside from whether there is anything which could plausibly fit the model of progress they use, is that it’s not clear whether they would actually solve the significance problem. For example, while it does seem like it would be a significant achievement to cure a person’s disease or make an entire population 10% healthier, say, it does not seem so significant to make an 0.000001% improvement here. Thus, while models like this might allow *work* to carry on eternally, it seems like this work will continue producing *significant* value only for a finite amount of time.

Even if immortal beings could learn to care about such miniscule improvements in their quality of life, or the quality of some other projects output, such that these improvements were significant to *them*, they still might not count as significant in the way we need them to for meaningfulness. As Smuts asks, “Of course one can produce infinite variations on *Hamlet*, but why bother?” (2011, p.144). He continues: “we may never reach a point where all the love songs have been sung, but we can reach a point where there are no *significant* new kinds of love songs to sing” (p.144, my emphasis). The point here is that, even if we could find strategies to stretch out certain projects to fill infinity, and even if our work always struck *us* as producing impacts that mattered, the reality of the situation is that we’d have devolved to merely tinkering over objectively insignificant differences.

Another way of looking at this issue is that, in general, the significant achievements we are used to in mortal life typically fit the structure of being a solution to some substantial *problem* that affected us,[[88]](#footnote-88) but it just doesn’t seem there could still be such big historical problems after an infinite amount of work. It is true that there are some sources of significant work which appear to involve continuous *implementation* of certain practices or solutions to solve reoccurring problems, for instance, doctors need to keep treating patients and police officers need to keep solving crimes. However, my worry is that these sources of ongoing work are predicated upon larger underlying problems (e.g. disease, crime) and given huge amounts of research and effort, either these underlying problems themselves could be solved, or the quasi-routine jobs of implementing the smaller scale solutions could be automated. In either case, doctors and police officers would lose their source of significant work.

The only alternative would be to refuse to solve the underlying causes of such problems or to refuse to automate our current ways of managing the problems. However, as soon as the point is reached at which the doctors and police officers could have given up their jobs, if we had actually bothered to pursue these more efficient solutions, it starts to seem like this work is no longer genuinely required of us but is more like a *game* that we are playing. Although the reality of the situation would be more complicated, by refusing to use more efficient solutions, we would have essentially *created* problems to solve simply because we want the *work* itself. This is more-or-less the exact definition of game-playing arrived at by Bernard Suits: “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (1978, p.41).

Interestingly, Suits’ book ends with a discussion of something like the same worry I am examining here: the apparent *point* of all our efforts (and significant achievements) is to solve the problems of the world and leave us in a state in which we can focus only on doing those things which we find intrinsically valuable. However, such a ‘utopia’ would contain nothing other than what appears to Suits as *play* because all the real work would have been completed already or, otherwise, would be being taken care of without any need for our involvement (p.171). Moreover, if we voluntarily chose to take on old-fashioned jobs which could have been eliminated or automated, like medical work or detective work, Suits argues we would simply be *playing* at the game or sport of being a doctor or a police officer (p.174). The problem is, as Suits’ character Skepticus puts it: “People like to be building houses, or running large corporations, or doing scientific research to some *purpose*, you know, not just for the hell of it” (p.177, my emphasis), and we can connect this worry quite naturally to my discussion here. Essentially, if we are doing certain tasks or jobs, not for the sake of their results (since the results could come about without our effort), but rather merely for the sake of doing the work itself, we would appear not to be doing anything very *significant* or *meaningful* at all.

Nevertheless, one way the mortalists’ opponent could respond here might be to simply deny that game-playing – i.e. the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles – is necessarily an insignificant or meaningless way to spend one’s time. Moritz Schlick (1927), for instance, has argued that not only are sports and game-playing meaningful, but they are perhaps the *prime* sources of meaningfulness in our lives because they contain their own goal within them, and thus need not connect to any future state of affairs to ground their value, as many other of our daily activities typically do. I think there may be some truth in this, after all, a team winning the rugby world cup seems to be a significant and meaningful achievement at first glance, even though it is merely game-playing.[[89]](#footnote-89) Thus, it may be that there is some value in game-playing and thus a life of nothing but game-playing could even manage to be significant and meaningful.[[90]](#footnote-90) Moreover, we could keep this going for a very long time, if we kept playing sports and setting ourselves new challenges.

However, even if such a life could be significant and meaningful for a while, could it remain so *forever*? Would such game-playing not start to become insignificant too, after long enough? Of course, the world championships of various sports are repeated again and again without appearing to lose significance; however, in these cases, each instance of the game is never identical because the players are learning and developing, and the team-members change year on year. Thus, even though there is a rugby world cup every four years, the same *exact* tournament is never repeated. It is not clear the same could be true for immortal game-playing though. It is plausible that eventually each person would reach the ceiling (or their particular ceiling) of how skilled one can be at every particular game or sport, and every combination of team members for every sport would have been cycled through. Therefore, would there not come a time when immortals would end up repeating, not just the same games, but the same *exact* version of each game? At this point, when everyone’s patterns of action have been learnt and no game holds any surprise any longer, would playing on still hold any interest, let alone provide the opportunity for significant victories? Of course, forgetfulness could once again be of use to immortals here – preventing them from predicting each other’s moves and thus keeping the games feeling fresh – but would *this* life, of unknowingly repeating the same games again and again for eternity, be endlessly significant or meaningful? I do not know the answer to this question.

To summarise this discussion, while it seems as though immortal beings could be capable of living lives filled with purpose and activity for eternity by repeatedly fulfilling the same desires, the potential for these lives to contain endless *significant* work is doubtful, since satisfying basic repeatable pleasures does not seem very significant. Furthermore, any solution proposed that would allegedly allow immortals to continue to make significant achievements throughout an *infinitely* long life appears to be on shaky ground as well; either the work would dry up at some point or its outputs would shrink to increasingly insignificant accomplishments, or it would become clear that such work was taken on voluntarily (with more efficient or final solutions being ignored) and so victories would be no more significant than they are when we play sports or board games. Finally, while I have noted the possibility that game-playing could provide an opportunity for significant achievements in some ways, like all other activities, it seems that immortal beings will eventually start repeating the games they play (knowingly or unknowingly) and this *might* be seen as sapping away the significance of each victory. It may be significant to climb Mount Everest, even a few times in different conditions, but endlessly repeating the *exact same* climb, as immortals inevitably would, may hold no significance at all, even if it remains subjectively engaging.

4.4.2 Must a person perpetually achieve significant things to retain a significant life?

The potential for immortal beings to keep accomplishing significant things for all eternity is unclear. However, even if we put the mortalists in the strongest possible position by granting that immortal lives *must* become empty of new significant achievements after enough time, we can still question whether this is such a catastrophic problem. Certainly, it appears that we might *prefer* an endlessly enjoyable though ultimately meaningless life to a life which ends in the grave.[[91]](#footnote-91) Nevertheless, what I am suggesting here is that, even if immortal life might become empty of new significant achievements after a time, that may not even be sufficient to render the life *insignificant* or *meaningless* on the whole. In other words, the above inference from premise 3 through to the conclusion that immortal lives could not be meaningful is not as clear-cut as it might have first appeared.

To explain: usually, if we want to compare the significance of two mortal lives, we might simply examine the magnitude of their impact on the world and consider the individual with the largest and most valuable achievements to be the most significant. Yet, on this calculation of significance, we have reason to think that immortal lives would be *more* significant than mortal ones, at least on average. Simply put, this is because, even though immortal lives may inevitably become empty of new significant work after enough time, immortal beings would still get vastly more time to do significant work than mortals do. For example, a very long-lived mortal may get less than a century of significant work before it is all over. However, an immortal life would continue, presumably, to be full of significant work for far longer. Even if they ran out of new significant things to do after a mere ten thousand years (and the preceding discussion, I think, indicates it could take a lot longer than that), it still looks as though the immortal has the opportunity to gain a *hundred times more* significance for their life than a mortal could have.[[92]](#footnote-92)

If immortal lives are supposed to end up insignificant compared to mortal lives then, the problem cannot be to do with their absolute degree of impact, summed over the entire life. The mortalist will thus have to provide some explanation as to why immortal lives are insignificant, and insignificant in a way mortal lives are not, on the grounds that they cannot keep producing significant achievements *forever*, despite the fact that their absolute number and magnitude of significant achievements would likely be considerably higher than our own. In other words, they would have to explain how an immortal life could lose the substantial significance it had gained early on by persisting through to a state of existence which somehow undermined it. Something like this suggestion can be read in Hauskeller when he warns that “we may not want to risk retroactively making our lives meaningless by living too long” (2015, p.6),[[93]](#footnote-93) but how are we to understand this worry?

One strategy the mortalist could take is to claim that a life can only be truly significant if the individual produced significant achievements *throughout* their whole existence, from start to finish. This would be a mistake, however, because it would rule that most mortals do not actually have significant lives. After all, apart from Mozart, very few of us achieve anything significant until we are adults. A better suggestion would be that an individual’s life can only be truly significant if, once they *start* making significant achievements, they keep making achievements of similar value from then on. Thus, an immortal’s life would become empty of significance if they ran out of significant things to do, even if they had accomplished great things in the past.

Again, however, I don’t think this is the right way of calculating the significance of a life. First of all, it implies that immortal beings could solve the problem under discussion merely by exponentially slowing down or spacing out their significant projects, so that they spread to take up the rest of time. In other words, they could spend 100 years on their first big project, 1000 on the next, 10,000 on the one after that etc. Thus, a finite number of projects might be made to last for eternity and immortals would always have significant projects *ongoing* in some sense, meaning their lives would retain their significance forever. This seems like a very odd suggestion, though. The notion that an immortal could turn an insignificant existence into a significant one just by artificially restructuring and dragging out their accomplishments is not particularly plausible.

Furthermore, the claim that a person’s life is only significant when they have both accomplished important things *and* are en route to accomplishing more in the future gives the wrong evaluations for certain mortal lives. For instance, it is well known that Einstein made his most significant discovery at the age of 26 and never did anything quite as important after that. However, if we assume, to make things even clearer, that Einstein produced literally nothing whatsoever after the age of 26, what then? This theory would entail that his life was insignificant because of the fifty years at the end where he accomplished nothing of value, but this is obviously the wrong conclusion; even an Einstein whose life was entirely empty of success after discovering special relativity would have still clearly had a significant and meaningful life on the whole. Long periods empty of significant activity cannot therefore be grounds to say the entire life was insignificant, at least, not when the life contains such important accomplishments as Einstein’s did.

Granting this, if the mortalists want to rule out immortal beings as having significant lives, they cannot merely point to the presence of long periods of insignificant activity. This would falsely rule out many mortals who did indeed have significant lives and allow immortals to escape the charge by merely re-ordering their projects throughout their existence. Another, more plausible suggestion, would hold that significance is not an absolute measurement of the impact of one’s actions, but of the impact of one’s actions *divided* by one’s lifespan. In other words:

Significance = Impact of achievements

Lifespan in years

This would mean that Einstein would have a significant life, despite long periods of insignificant activity because, overall, he made a sufficiently large impact with regard to the amount of time he was alive. Trisel seems to hold something like this view, for instance, claiming that Einstein’s life would have become less and less meaningful the longer he went on living (2015, p.75). Accordingly, he claims that “death simply *upholds* the meaning in the person’s life by preventing it from becoming less meaningful” (p.75-76).

In fact, the problem such a formula poses for immortal lives is even worse than Trisel makes out. If this is indeed the right way of calculating significance, then immortal lives would not simply end up with very low levels of significance, but effectively *no* significance at all. This is because the lifespan of an immortal being is *infinitely large*, and anything divided by infinity is zero. Thus, it would not matter how many thousands of years of significant achievements an immortal had worked through, if their life continued on for *eternity*, the overall significance of their life would shrink to nothing, leaving their existences entirely *insignificant* and meaningless.[[94]](#footnote-94) On the other hand, the argument goes, so long as mortals with their finite lives had achieved *something* in their short time on Earth, they would never end up with completely insignificant lives like this. Thus, the mortalist could conclude, death really is a necessary condition for our lives being meaningful because it prevents them becoming insignificant over time.

This is the strongest mortalist argument considered yet, I think, but I don’t believe it is all that convincing for two reasons: first, I don’t believe that significance should be calculated in this time-relative manner; second, even if it was, I see no reason to think it shouldn’t pose an equally serious threat to the meaningfulness of mortal lives too. To start with the former, why should we accept the above formula is the correct way to determine the significance of a life? One motivation for accepting it might be because it can be seen as taking the skill or wisdom of the individual into account. For instance, if it takes A 100 years to achieve something and B only 50 years to achieve something of the same impact, then we might think either that B exercised much greater skill in choosing or pursuing his project, or that A was, in some way, lazy or clumsy in his own pursuit. Assuming we think it would be less significant or meaningful to achieve something through poor or lethargic work than it would be to produce it through devoted and expert work, this formula would appear to reflect that.

Nevertheless, the formula will not reflect the degree of laziness or skill in the life’s work in every case. For instance, even amongst mortals there can be many forces which can interrupt, delay, or destroy an individual’s projects, completely outside of anything they could have controlled or foreseen. The fact that A took twice as long to produce the same value as B might therefore have nothing to do with their relative skills or determination and everything to do with, say, the country or class they were born into. Moreover, this will certainly apply in the case of immortal beings, for whom the eventual emptying of significant achievements from their life may not be a result of their own laziness or failure, but rather their overwhelming success in completing every significant project that exists to be completed. Thus, the relative insignificance of their effects over their vast lifespans would not reflect their own characters or choices in a negative way.

This formula also gives counter-intuitive evaluations in some key cases. For instance, imagine C lived only ten years but produced an impact score of 100, whereas D lived for one hundred years and produced an impact score of 100 for *each* decade. According to the formula above, C and D have equally significant lives because they each have an overall significance score of 10 (i.e. their average level of impact per-year was 10 units). Yet, D’s absolute level of impact is ten times higher than C’s. It therefore seems wrong to say that D’s life was no more significant than C’s. Moreover, if we imagine that E lived a life identical to D’s, but then lived an additional ten years where they only achieved 5 units of impact, then E would actually come out as having a *less* significant life than D and even C, because their average level of significance per-year would have been pulled down. This seems absurd though, E has achieved more than ten times as much good as C, and even a tiny bit more than D. Thus, it would surely be a misuse of the word to label E’s life as the least significant overall.

The unintuitive entailments of the above formula can be drawn out even further. For instance, upon E reaching their 100th birthday, the formula would recommend that the best way to maximise the significance of their life would be to jump off a tall building as soon as possible, rather than pressing on into a future where they could achieve *some* further good (5 units) but at a somewhat slower rate than they were used to. In fact, the formula would have recommended suicide at any time after their tenth birthday since that too would have maximised the overall significance score of their life, regardless of the fact that they could have achieved the same amount of impact again, ten times over. In conclusion, even if there is some reason to incorporate a measurement of lifespan (or better yet, time taken per-project) into our formula for significance, taking significance purely as average impact over lifespan is clearly a mistake.

Moreover, my second objection to the argument presented here is that it would be just as damaging to mortal life as immortal life, once understood correctly. In brief, we have rejected the laziness/skilfulness motivation for accepting the above formula, since it does not always reflect those factors. However, the only other obvious motivation for accepting the formula is simply that, when we view a particular achievement against a larger temporal backdrop, it tends to appear less significant than if we viewed it against a smaller temporal backdrop. For instance, Einstein’s achievement looks more significant when we examine only the first thirty years of his life, and somewhat less so when we consider all 76. Specifically, the complaint under examination could thus be that the significance of an immortal’s achievements would shrink to the point of disappearing as time marched onward because they would be rendered increasingly miniscule relative to their ever-growing temporal context. Yet, time marches on regardless of whether we are alive to see it pass. Why, then, should our own deaths be something which prevent our achievements from losing their significance? In other words, why should the formula for significance above refer to the lifespan of the individual, rather than simply time itself?

If significance is a matter of impact over *time*, rather than impact over *lifespan*, it would appear that both immortals and mortals alike are under threat of their lives becoming insignificant. The fact that mortals cease to produce new significant achievements because they are dead, rather than because there are no more significant achievements to pursue, will be irrelevant; if significance truly works this way, then it seems that, in a billion years, all of Einstein’s achievements would have been reduced to insignificance regardless of whether he lived as an immortal to see it happen or died as he actually did. The mortalist, to save their argument here, would now have to come up with some reason as to why one’s being dead prevents the significance of their life vanishing across endless time, but no good justification appears to be available.

A mortalist could, for instance, argue that the significance of one’s life is somehow fixed at the point of death, because that is when the life itself ends. This would be equivalent to saying that nothing which happens in the theatre after the end of a play can affect the aesthetic value of the play itself. An argument like this would make sense if we were measuring something like how *pleasurable* the life was, since the things which determine that are indeed bounded by the birth and death of the individual. Nevertheless, we are measuring the *significance* of the life, and that does not seem to be bounded in the same way. Just as one can measure the *significance* of a play in things which take place outside of the theatre and after the play is finished, so can one measure the significance of a life in things which happen after the individual has died. As a case in point, consider Van Gogh, who sold only one painting in his lifetime, but is now revered as one of the greatest artists of all time. If the significance of one’s life was fixed at the point of death, then Van Gogh could not be said to have had a significant life, but this is obviously wrong.

Another claim the mortalist could make is that only impact or changes to impact which one *experiences* can count towards the significance of one’s life. Thus, mortals would be protected from their lives becoming insignificant because they would be dead to it, unlike immortals who would have to live through it. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out, first, that such an immortal existence might not actually be experienced as in any way insignificant given the existence of repeatable projects and natural forgetfulness. Moreover, how a life is experienced doesn’t actually seem to be all that relevant to determining its true significance. For instance, consider a woman who works hard to find a cure for some disease, but then dies before she realises she was successful. The fact that she does not and cannot experience the impact of her actions does not seem to undermine their significance. Equally, if a man slipped into a coma on his twentieth birthday and only woke up after fifty years, the fact that he did not and could not experience his adult life’s lack of impact would not negate the insignificance of that time period.

Granting this, it seems as though our experiences are irrelevant, in general, in determining the actual significance of our lives. Thus, where both the achievements of mortals and immortals may appear to shrink as time passes, it does not appear to matter at all that only immortals could be conscious of this effect. Moreover, there does not seem to be any other plausible reason for thinking that the death of the mortal would preserve the significance of their accomplishments relative to the immortal. In short, given both mortal and immortal lives will cease to generate any new significant achievements, sooner or later, if it is a problem for the latter, it will be a problem for the former. Nevertheless, I don’t believe this is actually a problem for either. Primarily this is because, as I argued above, significance should not be understood as a measurement of the impact of one’s actions divided by lifespan *or* time.

Instead, it makes much more sense to treat significance as a more absolute measurement of the impact of a life’s achievements (perhaps also enhanced by the irreplaceability and challenge involved in them). In such a case, whether a life will be considered significant overall, and how significant, will depend on how much impact the individual produced, regardless of how long the life (or time itself) will continue on for. Moreover, as I noted at the start of this section, and importantly for this discussion, it seems reasonable to think that immortals would be *better* at producing some valuable impact than mortals, given they get so much longer to work towards it. Thus, it would be mortals, not immortals, which are most at risk of having insignificant lives.[[95]](#footnote-95)

In general, while it may be true that an immortal could not keep perpetually producing significant achievements forever, we have seen no reason to think this must render their life insignificant overall, let alone meaningless. Einstein’s life was significant and meaningful, and will remain so forever, despite the latter half of his life being comparatively empty of significant achievements. Similarly, an immortal’s life could remain significant forever, given their earlier achievements, even while they live out the rest of their years doing nothing more important than reading books, hiking mountains, and playing games with their friends.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered several arguments for the claim that immortal life would necessarily be insignificant and therefore meaningless. The first three arguments highlighted additional requirements for truly significant achievements or lives – namely that they be virtuous, challenging, and that one’s contribution be unique or irreplaceable – and then claimed that immortal beings could not satisfy such requirements. Nevertheless, in the first two cases, I argued that immortal beings would indeed be able to pursue and achieve both virtuous and challenging goals, and in the final case, I gave some reasons for doubting that uniqueness or irreplaceability actually is *essential* for one’s life or contributions to count as significant (even if it might enhance this significance). In short, immortal life would have its own problems, and producing value through overcoming enough of these problems would be sufficient to render one’s life significant, even if there were other immortals who could or would have taken one’s place.

The final argument I considered held that immortal life would ultimately be insignificant because it would inevitably become empty of new significant achievements. The fundamental premise of this argument is plausible (though not unquestionable), given the infinite length of immortal lives and the seemingly finite list of significant things one can do in this universe. However, even accepting this premise would not entail that immortal life would necessarily become insignificant on the whole; on the most plausible understanding of significance, one’s life can remain significant after securing impactful and valuable achievements, even if one does not continue securing similar achievements *endlessly* – and immortal beings will have a very long time to store up a collection of significant achievements before they start to run out.

5. Immortality and coherence

“your life is a book

it is more than its first and last page

and is mostly made up of 'and's and 'the's”

(Henson, 2015, p.10)

5.1 Life-stories and meaningfulness

The present chapter will focus on attempting to make sense of, and argue against, mortalist claims of the following sort:

“only a finite life can be meaningful because only a finite life can be a story that has a beginning, middle and end. Death is what frames our life, and only a framed life can have meaning” (Hart, 2003).

Statements of this kind crop up in many places throughout the literature.[[96]](#footnote-96) However, it is unclear at first glance exactly how stories and framing are supposed to be relevant to the meaningfulness of our lives. Is this narrativist talk merely symbolic or is the claim that immortal lives cannot be stories supposed to be understood in a more literal sense? Galen Strawson notes that narrative language has become “intensely fashionable” in various academic disciplines (2004, p.428), and Kathy Behrendt agrees with this observation, adding that “The narrative turn also infiltrates areas of practical concern and popular culture, where it tends to manifest in the form of explicit, often public, self-narratives” (2014, p.334). However, I think there is more to the trend of connecting the meaningfulness of our lives to our ‘self-narratives’ than merely the fact that such language is fashionable. In particular, I think we can identify a relationship between stories and that third component of meaningfulness I identified in Chapter 2: coherence. Specifying this relationship will be the focus of this section.

The idea that narratives and coherence are related together is a fairly common notion. For instance, Joshua Seachris points out that “our project of making sense of the world (in various spheres) is largely carried out narratively” (2009, p.11).[[97]](#footnote-97) Similarly, speaking specifically about comprehending *human existences*, Johan Brannmark has argued that “our lives are best understood in terms of their narrative structure” (2003, p.321), and David Heyd and Franklin Miller write that “Stories, at least if they are good of their kind, make sense, present a coherent series of events... It is only natural then to speak about ‘life stories’” (2010, p.23). This final passage indicates not just that telling stories can be an effective way to make some sequence of events coherent to us, but that this function may even be a *constitutive* feature of stories (or good ones, at least).

This stronger claim, too, finds a great deal of support in the literature. For instance, J. David Velleman asserts that:

“A story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but also understanding. We might therefore be tempted to describe narrative as a genre of explanation” (Velleman, 2003, p.1).

Along the same lines, Strawson suggests that any narrative should bring “*unity* or *coherence*” to the events being depicted (2004, p.439), and Samantha Vice gives further detail to this idea by proposing that an essential feature of any narrative is “that it shows connections between its constitutive elements and traces continuities and changes through time” (2003, p.95). In other words, in order for some recounting of events to *count* as a story, it must show how the events are related together, for instance, through cause and effect, rather than simply describing them in succession. This feature, Vice claims, is what makes narratives distinct from what she calls “annals or chronicles” which merely “list events without noting their larger significance or connections” (p.95).

However, while interpreting sequences of events as stories may be one very useful way of helping us understand their contents and structure, and perhaps even what stories are *for*, it does not appear that narrativisation is *essential* for such sense-making. For instance, Vice also points out that we can strive to find coherence in our lives without having to understand them in a narrative form (p.96), and Strawson takes the point a little further, explaining how narrativising events is merely one method of 'form-finding' (which is a general term for all kinds of 'coherence-seeking'), and that one can engage in form-finding without practising any story-telling (2004, p.440). Nevertheless, even if other strategies exist, the fact that narrativity is a genuine method of form-finding is enough to indicate there may indeed be some connection between the *stories* of our lives and their *coherence*. Exactly what this connection is, I will explain shortly.

It has also been relatively popular to draw a connection directly between our life-stories and their *meaningfulness*. For instance, there are several theorists who hold that the meaningfulness of one’s life is entirely determined by the contents, quality, or structure of one’s life-*story* in some way. Wai-Hung Wong, for one example, has asserted that “a person's life is meaningful if it contains material for an autobiography that she thinks is worth writing and others think is worth reading” (2008, p.138).[[98]](#footnote-98) Similarly, John Fischer contends that “our lives are stories in a strict sense, and they can have a distinctive kind of meaning – narrative meaning” (2009, p.169), and Antti Kauppinen suggests that an ideally meaningful life will be one that has a coherent life-story involving certain sorts of valuable projects, suitably related together (2012).

Each theorist here may have slightly different motivations for presenting their theory in narrativist terms; however, what seems common to all of them is their awareness that the meaningfulness of a life cannot be calculated merely by adding up the quality of individual moments or achievements. Instead, they acknowledge that the meaningfulness of a life can also be affected by how the events of our lives are distributed, ordered, and related over time. This is supposed to mirror how the meaning of events within a *story* can be affected by their organisation and connection to earlier or later events in the plot (Fischer, 2005, p.382). As an example of this, Fischer points out that there are certain storylines which seem to enhance the meaningfulness of a life, such as one’s early efforts leading to later successes, or one learning from past mistakes or tragedies (2005, p.393).[[99]](#footnote-99)

Additionally, Kauppinen notes that a life would seem less meaningful overall if its individual chapters were either entirely repetitive or completely disconnected, such that nothing ever led anywhere and the individual was essentially starting over from scratch again and again (2012, p.366-7).[[100]](#footnote-100) Granting this, Kauppinen is correct to suggest that, when we are assessing the overall meaningfulness of a life, we should examine the “relationships among [the] life's episodes and chapters”, not just the chapters themselves, held independently (p.356). Otherwise what seemed like a meaningful life when considered day by day, or month by month, might actually turn out to be substantially less meaningful, if we stepped back to realise how poorly structured the life was as a whole.

What actually makes these negative plot structures bad for meaningfulness though? I believe the answer has something to do with their intelligibility. Specifically, I believe a substantial problem with the negative examples given above is that the lives would not be very *coherent* or comprehensible overall.[[101]](#footnote-101) For instance, a life which merely repeated the same activity over and over would seem odd and difficult to make sense of, as would a life which was entirely disordered, jumping from place to place and project to project with no apparent connections. Similarly, I think what makes an achievement seem more meaningful when one works towards it, rather than accomplishing it by accident – besides the fact that the former involves more purposefulness and challenge – is that this is a more familiar and intelligible turn of events to us. Equally, if a tragedy or mistake was learned from, rather than merely ignored, or treated as an entirely negative and pointless event, then this could grant the tragedy an intelligible place in one’s life-story. A life-story that involved tragedies which occurred completely randomly and were never ‘redeemed’ any way in future life, on the other hand, would appear far less coherent overall.[[102]](#footnote-102)

To summarise what has been said so far: many theorists have drawn connections between both narratives and coherence, and narratives and meaningfulness, and the best way of understanding these connections, I propose, is to accept what I said in Chapter 2 – that the coherence of a life is a key determinant of its meaningfulness – and to see our life-stories as somehow mediating this relationship. Specifically, I am suggesting that our lives need to be adequately coherent to be meaningful, and that the coherence of our lives can be determined or revealed, in one way, by the comprehensibility of our life-stories. If one’s life follows familiar patterns of rational behaviour and sensible pursuits leading to worthwhile achievements, then their life-story is likely to seem comprehensible, and the life itself potentially meaningful. On the other hand, if one’s life-story is plagued by random events, irrational actions and beliefs, or a repetitive or chaotic structure, then it may appear to be inadequately comprehensible overall, and this may entail that the life itself was insufficiently coherent and meaningless as a result.

A puzzle, at this point, however, is that it is not entirely clear what it is supposed to mean to say that we *have* ‘life-stories’. Certainly, this does not seem to be true literally, since one might think that a story, in the normal sense of the word, is something that is necessarily spokento an audience by a narrator, or perhaps written out. Yet, a human life is simply a sequence of events, so it is not *itself* a story. It is perhaps the sort of thing a narrator could write a story about, but neither do most ordinary individuals actually have biographies written about them all that often. How do such individuals *have* life-stories then? Some narrativists, such as Kauppinen (2013, p.169) and Fischer (2012, p.358), indicate that when they talk about life-stories or the narrative content of our lives, what they really mean to refer to is the *actual* events of our lives and the way they are related together. Thus, their use of narrative language is somewhat metaphorical. However, I think this is slightly confusing so, for my purposes, I will instead take the term ‘life-story’ to refer not to the actual events of the individual’s life, nor any actual books which are written about them, but rather to the true hypothetical narrative which *could* be told about their life.

When I say that a person *has* a life-story, therefore, what this means is simply that the events of their life are distributed and connected in such a way as to be ‘essentially narratable’.[[103]](#footnote-103) In other words, one has a life-story when the events of one’s life are amenable to being turned into a story which is both accurate and at least *minimally* comprehensible (otherwise it may not count as a ‘story’ at all). With this in mind, we can now see more precisely how life-stories, coherence, and meaningfulness are all interconnected: The actual events of a person’s life determine what kind of hypothetical life-story they possess, and the coherence of their life is determined or revealed to some extent by how comprehensible this hypothetical life-story would be.[[104]](#footnote-104) Thus, because coherence is essential for meaningfulness, one’s life-story must possess a sufficient or adequate level of comprehensibility in order for one’s actual life to be meaningful.[[105]](#footnote-105) To keep things clear here, I will try to talk only of the ‘comprehensibility’ or ‘intelligibility’ of life-*stories*, and reserve ‘coherence’ to refer to the quality of actual *lives* which do in fact provide the material for comprehensible life-stories.[[106]](#footnote-106)

To reiterate what I have said above, whether a person’s life is coherent or not can be determined by the intelligibility of any true life-story which could be hypothetically told or written about them. There is an initial worry to be dealt with here, however: that no lives are, in fact, narratable to any serious degree, and so this test would be impossible to pass. In other words, we might be concerned that *real* human lives are so different from the stories we usually tell, that absolutely *none* could be turned into an adequately comprehensible narrative. One reason we might have for thinking this is the presence of what Metz calls 'dead time' in our lives (2013, p.53). By this he means all the time we spend doing things like sleeping, eating, going to the toilet, and paying bills. These things, as Wong points out, would not normally be expected to appear in someone’s “biographical life” (2008, p.129), yet they are real moments of our lives. If an adequately intelligible life-story could not involve detailed descriptions of all this dead time,[[107]](#footnote-107) it seems to follow that a significant amount of selective and perhaps deceptive editing would be necessary to construct any reasonably comprehensible life-story from our actual lives.

Moreover, on top of this worry about any comprehensible life-stories being extremely abridged, we might also worry that our lives are generally too chaotic and disordered in reality for any narrative made from them to be both adequately intelligible *and* true. The thought is, as Vice succinctly puts it, that: “Our lives are messier and greater than stories” (2003, p.108). On the same note, Brannmark suggests that:

“Our lives contain an immense number of events which, while certainly not being totally disparate or unconnected with each other, nevertheless constitute narrative threads that often progress quite haphazardly and are rarely brought to any real conclusions” (Brannmark, 2003, p.332).

If this observation is correct, we might be concerned that the actual life-stories we examine when reflecting on our lives are inevitably airbrushed and inaccurate versions of what really happened, twisted so as to make a more comprehensible story. Acknowledging this, and the above worry about dead time, it may appear that no real lives could ever count as coherent overall, since either we let the dead-time and messiness of our lives remain in our hypothetical life-stories, in which case they will be incomprehensible, or we remove the dead time and smooth over the complexities of our lives, in which case the life-stories we end up with would be too inaccurate to possibly count as being true. Across the board, one might worry that our lives are just not the kinds of things which can be narrativised both truthfully and intelligibly: either they must be accurate but incomprehensible, or comprehensible but inaccurate.

This objection is fairly well aimed; it is true any life-story we can tell will fail to report the *entire* life with 100% accuracy, otherwise telling it out loud might take as long as the life took to lead in the first place and would include so much irrelevant information that little sense could be made of it. For our life-stories to be adequately intelligible, some editing is necessary at least. However, the narrativisation process through which we turn a life into an intelligible life-story need not be seen as resulting in a complete fabrication, or even something problematically far from the truth. Focusing first on the problem of dead time, I think it is equally plausible to suggest that the 'editing' which is necessary here simply *preserves* the coherence already in our lives by cutting out all unimportant details, thereby resulting in a life-story which is easier to grasp but still true and accurate in all the ways that matter. Similarly, at least *some* interpretive work – such as bringing certain salient causal chains to the forefront of the life-story which may have been buried underneath many trivial or everyday events – might also be an acceptable aspect of the narrativisation of a life, at least provided that interpretive work does not twist things *too* far or stray into the realm of absolute falsification.

It is certainly possible for us to tell unrealistic stories about certain people’s lives; however, I see no reason why any departure from a 1:1 scale retelling of every event in the life should be seen as problematically inaccurate. A talented journalist, for instance, can tell the story of a complex series of events by arranging them into the most intelligible narrative structure without thereby turning her article into a work of fiction. Similarly, Heyd and Miller describe history as an “attempt to tell the story of the past in a way which would make the actions of people and collectives intelligible and uncover causal relations between significant events” (2010, p.23). Indeed, I have already suggested that narratives might be seen (or even defined) as strategies for recounting series of events in such a way as to transmit an *understanding* of this sequence to the audience, and how else *could* a story do this except by stressing the salient causal connections between these events at an appropriate level of detail or abstractionnecessary, whilst de-emphasising or ignoring the less relevant events.

Therefore, if constructing one's life-story is understood merely as a “mechanism for highlighting the meaning and purpose of one’s life” (Schenck and Roscoe, 2009, p.62), I see no reason to consider its output dishonest or illegitimate. Specifically, the editing and interpreting that takes place when we narrativise something needn’t be seen as a problem; in fact, it is only through these manipulations that stories can perform what is seen, by some, as their primary function: the conveyance of understanding. As Rosati concludes, “a narrative need not (and, practically speaking, could not) aim at a complete recounting of events, but its incompleteness need not render it less truthful or informative or revealing” (2013b, p.34).

Nevertheless, even if we accept that the interpretive work which goes into creating a life-story can result in a narrative which is both comprehensible and accurate *enough*, isn't it still true that there are multiple different ways one might tell that same story? If we are allowing *some* divergence in the life-story from the mere chronology of every actual moment in the life as it happened, doesn't that necessarily open up the possibility of there being multiple equally true but *different* life-stories, plausibly even with different levels of intelligibility? Fischer himself writes: “I do not suppose that there is a hegemonic perspective from which our stories get told” (2009, p.172). And thus:

“The claim that in acting freely, we write a sentence in the narrative of our lives suggests that there is a single story of our lives – a given narrative to which we add sentences. But of course this is an unreasonable picture. Rather, our bodily movements and behaviour are subject to different interpretations” (Fischer, 2009, p.172).

The worry here is that there could be multiple equally plausible life-stories of the same individual’s life. However, again, I suggest this is a bullet we can bite, especially once we remember that we are not allowing outright fabrication in our life-stories. There may be multiple *angles* on a life’s events, just as a historian may see multiple angles on a particular historical event; yet, to count as reasonably accurate, each actual telling of the story still has to be in line with the facts, and these facts thus limit, to a tolerable degree, the range of *true-enough* stories which may be told about the life. For instance, a narrative which portrayed Nelson Mandela as being a successful lion-tamer would simply be unacceptable. Though there may be multiple ways of telling the story of Mandela’s life then, any life-story which did not accurately include his fight against apartheid as at least a primary plot-line can be ruled out. As Fischer puts it:

“in acting freely we constrain the plausible stories of our lives. Whereas various defensible interpretations will still be possible, our behaviour can significantly constrain the plausibility of some of these interpretations, thus limiting the range of reasonable life-stories” (Fischer, 2009, p.172).

Granting this, when evaluating the level of comprehensibility in one’s life-stories, it might be impossible to pick out a precise amount. Nevertheless, we will be able to narrow it down to a fairly tight range given the variety of true-enough life-stories which are available. The fact that the notion of a life-story allows for some small amount of interpretation with regard to the plotting of someone's life is thus not particularly troubling.

We are now in a position to draw a final conclusion with regard to this discussion about coherence and life-stories. Specifically, what seems to have emerged is the following: the actual events of one’s life constrain the range of reasonably accurate stories which can be told about it, and we can then examine this group of life-stories to see how comprehensible they are. If any of them are sufficiently comprehensible, then the life itself could be considered coherent overall and thus stands a chance of being meaningful (provided it also includes sufficient levels of purposefulness and significance). Alternatively, if none of the reasonably accurate life-stories which one’s life provided the material for are comprehensible or intelligible to some sufficient degree, then one’s life will count as incoherent and hence meaningless overall. The worry to be discussed in the remainder of this chapter is then that, although mortals are amenable to having comprehensible life-stories, the life-stories of immortal beings could *never* be comprehensible. From now on, however, I will return to talking of *the* life-story of a particular individual, rather than their range of true-enough life-stories.[[108]](#footnote-108)

5.2 The revisability argument

As noted at the start of this chapter, some theorists are of the impression that an infinitely long life would be undesirable because the story of such a life would be, in some sense, incomprehensible or meaningless. For instance, Geoffrey Scarre argues:

“an unending life would be one that lacked any meaningful shape or pattern... Although phases of the life might have their own internal structure, it would be as a whole (not that it could ever be grasped that way) completely shapeless... we see our past and our future as parts of one and the same life, chapters in the same narrative. No coherent, graspable narrative, however, could link together our existence of endless ages.” (Scarre, 2007, p.58-59)

The mortalists’ claim, as Kathy Behrendt expresses it, is thus that:

“It is not just its duration or diachronic extension but its finitude that permits our lives to be structured along conventional narrative lines, which in turn allows us to partake of the benefits that narrativity putatively confers… [and] In the case of lived narratives, the ending is secured and indeed constituted by death” (Behrendt, 2007, p.145).[[109]](#footnote-109)

In other words, immortal beings are allegedly incapable of possessing life-stories in the same way that mortals can, and this may prevent their lives from being meaningful. Specifically, with regard to my proposal, we can interpret the mortalists as claiming that an immortal’s infinitely long life-story could not be comprehensible enough for the underlying life to count as coherent (or perhaps that any attempted narrative of their life would be so incomprehensible as to not even count as a life-story at all), and that is why their life cannot be meaningful.

Nevertheless, why think that a life must be finite in order to provide the material for a comprehensible life-story? True, when one imagines a narrative, one typically pictures a novel and all novels we have ever experienced, without fail, have ended. Even if we do not consider them to be well rounded off, or even if the author died mid-sentence, the book still has a final page. Thus, it might seem difficult or impossible to imagine that a narrative could exist in any other way. Moreover, the only *infinite* things we experience (to the extent we can even count these as 'experiences' of the infinite) tend to be things like infinitely recurring decimal numbers, such as Pi, and regardless of whether these repeating or irrational numbers are entirely comprehensible, they are certainly not narratives in any normal sense of the word.

Nevertheless, none of these observations prove that there could not exist, in theory, narratives that were both intelligible and infinitely long, and some philosophers would agree with this point. For instance, Fischer asserts: “the fact that our lives are stories need not entail that they have endings” (2005, p.379). In other words, it is in line with Fischer’s narrativist theory itself that both mortal and immortal beings could possess life-stories in the right way. Confirming this elsewhere, he writes: “our lives can be thought to have value based on narrative structure, even apart from whether the lives are bounded temporally” (2006, p.380). So, for Fischer, a life being endlessly long would not prevent it from being narratable, nor stop it obtaining the benefits of this narrativity. Behrendt (2007) also appears open to the idea that, if a particular book had no ending, it would not render the content read so far to be unintelligible or meaningless. Moreover, she notes that “something similar could be said for self-narratives; our inability to complete them doesn’t undermine their narrative credentials as a whole” (p.149). Thus, she may also be open to the notion that immortals could have intelligible life-stories, even if they are never complete.

In support of this notion, Fischer provides a group of counter-examples which appear to be clear cases of narratives that are nonetheless potentially infinite in duration: soap operas (2005, p.399). Many of these serial television shows have already been running for decades and it does not seem unreasonable to think that they could (theoretically) continue running indefinitely. Yet, even if we imagine they would, this does not seem to undermine the intelligibility of any of the episodes or storylines in the shows so far; the characters’ motivations and actions would still be comprehensible, the individual plot-threads would still progress in familiar (even cliché) patterns, coming to their own conclusions, and the overall ongoing narrative would still strike us as perfectly intelligible. In fact, it seems frankly bizarre to suppose that the events currently happening in EastEnders would somehow cease to make any sense simply because executives decide that the show will never be cancelled.

Soaps, film series, comics, and all kinds of other serialised narratives seem to be perfectly intelligible regardless of whether they are finite in duration or not; however, is there any reason to suppose the narratives of human lives would be any different? Jenann Ismael provides one suggestion when he writes that an immortal life, structured as an endless series of ‘connected mini-narratives’, would be “like a sentence with commas, but no period”, unlike mortal lives which can be “meaningful units” because they are framed by death (2006, p.10). This argument seems quite promising at first; a sentence which was continuously being written and never came to an end would indeed seem quite incomprehensible. Although such a sentence might have words and phrases we could understand taken separately, when combined into a single unit like a sentence, such clauses could have their meaning or reference completely changed or reversed by language that appears later in the sentence. A classic school-yard example is the addition of the word ‘not’ at the end of any sentence, no matter how long, to entirely negate the positive claims the utterance appeared to be leading towards.

Until a particular individual sentence is finished then, even if it is built entirely out of words we can understand, it will not be fully comprehensible. Moreover, if we are to understand life in the same way – as the writing of a single sentence with a single meaning – then Ismael would be right to suppose that a person’s life-story could not be adequately comprehensible until it was over and completely written out. However, this is not the only analogy we could use here, and neither is it the most fitting one. Instead of suggesting that a life was equivalent to a single sentence being written, might it not make more sense to see a life as a whole paragraph or series of paragraphs, composed of individual sentences? This would perhaps be a more appropriate comparison because, typically, a person’s life can involve, for instance, *multiple* aims, projects, and achievements, not just one. Indeed, so far we have been talking about the *story* of our lives rather than the *sentence* of our lives, and if this metaphor is more fitting, it must be because our lives are complex things built out of many smaller actions and experiences, some which may build upon each other, but some which may be independent or even conflicting. If we see life this way – as a *series* of sentences telling a story, rather than a single unified sentence – then Ismael’s argument no longer applies. Because we are continuously completing new sentences to add to our story, rather than simply adding clauses to one gigantic sentence, our life-stories can be intelligible as they are going along, and even if they carry on going forever.

Just like a soap opera, a life might therefore appear to be intelligible even if there is no end in sight. If we see the narratives of our lives as being built out of many individual sentences rather than one gigantic sentence, it does not appear that these sentences must be unintelligible themselves simply because there are always new sentences to be added. Nevertheless, although each sentence written so far in an immortal’s life-story might seem to be comprehensible in themselves, there remains a further worry: that someone reading through the life-story would still lack a *full* understanding of these earlier passages in the story because they still stand to have their significance or role within the narrative changed by future events. Essentially, this is similar to the worry Ismael had about the revisability of the meaning of a sentence, but pulled back to the level of the entire story. While the notion that our lives were stories made up of individual sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, does seem to lend *some* intelligibility to these earlier units of narrative, the fact that the overall narrative would carry on being written, in an immortal life, may suggest that these earlier units would still resist *complete* comprehension – perhaps even enough to render them insufficiently comprehensible for the life to be meaningful.

This argument hinges on the thought that our understanding of any particular event in a person’s life-story is potentially revisable in light of future turns of plot. Certainly, this seems to be true with respect to ordinary stories. For instance, Brannmark notes that “A novel might even look like a weak one, but then a twist can occur in the final chapter and what previously seemed like flaws might be set in a new light” (2001, p.222). Similarly, Samantha Vice claims that “the elements of a narrative only have meaning within the overall context of the whole” (2003, p.95). Therefore, we may think that it is necessary for a book to be completed before one can claim to have comprehended its story accurately, or even judge that its story *was* comprehensible. If a particular story was always being written, on the other hand, our understanding of its plot so far appears open to being overturned as new facts are revealed and events transpire.

Something analogous seems to be true of our life-stories as well. For instance, our understanding of a particular tragedy in a person’s childhood can be thrown out or updated if the person manages to learn from that tragedy or find some value in it later in their life. Alternatively, our understanding of a particular scientific endeavour as being a worthy and well-chosen project could equally be revised if it later turns out to be a complete failure. It is not that these events or storylines in a person’s life-story would have been incomprehensible to us, but rather that we could not have *properly* comprehended them at the time, because we were still missing important information. As Metz puts it, we might think our understanding or appraisal of the chapters of a life-story are *“*merely *provisional*” while that life is still going on (2013, p.46).[[110]](#footnote-110) Thus, the only time we will be able to say *firmly* that we have accurately grasped the events of a person’s life would be when their life-story is complete.

To make things a little clearer, I will introduce a piece of terminology here: ‘narrative meaning’. By this I do not intend to pick out anything like the concept of *meaningfulness* which I tried to characterise in Chapter 2. Rather, in the following sections, when I speak of the ‘narrative meaning’ of an event or action or chapter in our life-stories, what I mean is essentially the *role* it plays in the narrative in which it appears. In other words, the narrative meaning of an event is simply the complete bundle of facts which pertain to it with regard to its position in the story, such as what led to it, what it involved, and what it resulted in, both directly and indirectly. To say that we have completely understood a particular event within a narrative is thus to say that we have grasped its narrative meaning, i.e. we have comprehended its nature and relevance for the other parts of the story. This follows a fairly natural way of discussing the *meaning* of certain events within a story, with reference to that story, as well as the way many of the theorists I will reference appear to be using ‘meaning’ in this debate. Stating the above concern using this terminology, we might say that our understanding of a particular event’s narrative meaning is open to revision as long as the story it features in is still being written.

It is fairly clear how this thought poses a problem for immortal beings. Mortal beings, whose lives come to an end, will arguably end up with life-stories which are finished and whose plotlines are fixed forever. Thus, for mortal beings, we would be able to examine all the chapters and events of their life-stories and come to an understanding of their *narrative meaning* which is determinate and final. Immortal life-stories, on the other hand, would keep on being written forever, and thus would apparently never arrive at a state in which their events’ narrative meaning was fixed for good. Future events in our life-stories seem to be able to re-write facts about past events, in some sense, and thus for beings whose life-stories always hold the possibility of more to come, it seems one’s comprehension of anything in the narrative so far could only be provisional and open to being overturned. This revisability argument could be put like this:[[111]](#footnote-111)

1. For a life to be meaningful, the life must be coherent.
2. For a life to be coherent, the person’s life-story must be adequately comprehensible.
3. One cannot comprehend the events in a person’s life story adequately until the story has finished being written and the narrative meaning of such events is fixed.
4. The life-stories of immortal beings would never stop being written.
5. The life-stories of immortal beings could never be adequately comprehensible.
6. Immortal beings could not have meaningful lives.

My objections to this revisability argument will be aimed at taking down premise 3. In short, I believe that one’s life-story can be adequately comprehensible, even if it has not yet finished being written. One reason we might think this is because, contrary to the claims above, the narrative meanings of events within our life-stories are not actually that vulnerable to being overturned by future events. For instance, Velleman contends it is *not* the case that, as long as our narratives go on, their early sub-plots will be eternally revisable in terms of their narrative meaning. In fact, he thinks that the longer a life goes on, the more the narrative meaning of various earlier chapters will be *set*. For Velleman, the older one gets, and the more complex one’s story becomes, the more the narrative meaning of one’s early life becomes *inflexible* (1991, p.58). This, according to Behrendt, apparently explains why we often have mid-life crises: because we appreciate that our ability to 'reconfigure' the narrative meaning of past events and re-aim the 'story' of our lives is slipping away from us (2014, p.342).

Essentially the idea is that the longer we live, and the more choices, actions, and life experiences we put after a particular event, the harder it will be for that event’s place in our overall life-story to be altered. For instance, say a person studied engineering at university and had lived an entire life working as an engineer, and was now retired at 70. It seems that someone reading this life-story could have a fairly accurate grasp of the narrative meaning of the engineering degree chapter of this person’s life; there does not appear to be much that could happen in the life now to overturn what that period of time was *about* and what it meant for the rest of the narrative. This person’s choice of degree had a big impact on their working career, but now that is in the past, it seems that its importance or relevance has been more or less decided and it is very unlikely anything could upset or overturn an understanding of it which was based only on the story of this person’s life so far. Behrendt expresses this notion eloquently:

“it is a product of the increase over time of the number of life events and the complexity of their relations, combined with the decrease of future opportunities for retroactive meaning-impact: the increasingly meaning-recalcitrant events pile up, and future opportunities for retroactive meaning-change run out” (Behrendt, 2014, p.342).

Metz, I think, would also be fairly open to this notion. In response to a similar argument, he asserts that there are some actions or projects we can engage in for which it seems like their meaning in our lives is more or less fixed and unchangeable. For instance, he thinks that finding a cure for cancer would have, at its core, a meaning for one's life which could not possibly be altered or diminished (2013, p.48). Thus, for the purposes of this discussion, we might also think we would not need to wait to see how events unfolded to be able to comprehend, relatively accurately and securely, the overall narrative meaning of this achievement.

Nevertheless, I am tempted to disagree with Velleman and Metz here. Though it does seem like some things will *appear* to have a clear narrative meaning from the very moment they are accomplished and, for most if not all things, this meaning will become *more* fixed over time, I think there will always remain an open possibility that something could happen in the future to alter this meaning somewhat, even perhaps to drastic extents. For instance, let’s imagine a person strove to find a cure for cancer, motivated by a desire to reduce human suffering. However, let’s also imagine this cure for cancer then caused a spike in human population, which in turn lead to resources shortages and war so much so that the cure for cancer actually *increased* human suffering in the long run. Now it seems the narrative meaning of this discovery has been entirely changed. Where once it was understood as a great and hard-won success in the person’s life-story, it is now presumably one of their greatest blunders. Furthermore, as long as a person’s story continues on, as it would indefinitely for immortals, I am not certain how anything in it could be free of this kind of vulnerability, i.e. the narrative meaning of essentially *any* event might be eternally at risk of similarly drastic future distortion, even if this seems unimaginably unlikely.

Granting the above, it may be correct that the narrative meaning of every event within an immortal’s life-story will be eternally revisable. Nevertheless, I think one can accept that fact and yet still reject premise 3. In other words, one could argue that, even though our understanding of the narrative meaning of a particular chapter of a person’s life is perpetually vulnerable to being overturned and updated in light of future events, that does not mean that its narrative meaning could not be adequately comprehensible at any particular point in time. The mortalist argument under discussion seems to be suggesting that, if our understanding of some event changes when new events transpire, then we *did not* actually have an understanding of that event in the first place, perhaps because we had false beliefs about what its *real* narrative meaning was – something which is only properly determined when the story is over. However, this seems to be a strange way of interpreting the situation.

Consider Brannmark’s way of wording the idea at the heart of this argument: that “later events and developments can change the meaning and relative importance of previous events and situations” (2003, p.333). Crucially, here, we can see that he says the future developments can 'change' the meaning of past events, not 'determine' or ‘decide’ it. The implication here is that these events already *had* a narrative meaning, it is just that this narrative meaning changed as time went on. Thus, rather than suggesting our initial comprehension of the event was wrong or inaccurate because we had hold of an illusory narrative meaning, it would perhaps make more sense to say that we could have indeed fully grasped the narrative meaning that this event actually had, and thus fully comprehended the event, it is simply that the narrative meaning itself later *changed* from what it once was. In such a case, the narrative meaning of this event could have been fully intelligible to us both now *and* then, even though its meaning is not what it used to be. The fact that it makes sense to us in different ways at different times – that the narrative meaning we understand it as having is different now – is no cause to suggest it did not *really* make sense to us in the first place, or that our initial understanding of it was lacking.

In light of this, it seems that it would not be a problem for our comprehension of our life-stories if the narrative meaning of events within them was revisable, not even if it was *eternally* revisable, as it might be for immortal being’s life-stories. This would be because, although the narrative facts and relevance of any particular project or plot-thread or chapter might *change* as the story moved onwards, this does not entail any understanding of the story before then would have been in any way inadequate; *at the time* it would have been both complete and accurate. Thus, it is possible to adequately comprehend the plots of stories which are still being written, and there would be nothing unavoidably incomprehensible about stories which never end. It is true that our understanding of the narrative might *develop* as time goes on, but that is compatible with the claim that the story was always something we could understand.

In addition, there are two more brief points that could be made about the notion of revisability with regard to the narrative meaning of events in our life-stories. The first is that it may be something mortal life-stories are vulnerable to as well. The second is that it might actually be a desirable thing to have. The first claim seems to be entailed simply by the observation that death needn’t be seen as providing the relevant sort of boundary or frame here. The mortalists seem to be assuming that the narrative meaning of events in one’s life will be fixed, and our life-stories over, at the moment one dies. However, this does not fit with our intuitions about, say, the lives of Van Gogh or Rosalind Franklin, whose contributions to the world only began to be recognised after they had passed away. If we believe that, for instance, Van Gogh’s life-story ended at the moment he died, and the narrative meaning of events within it was fixed at that moment, then his life-story seems to be of a failed artist. If we disagree, however, and suggest that Van Gogh’s life and work should be understood as, in the end, massively successful and valuable, then we are allowing his life-story to involve events which happened after he died and granting that these events can revise the narrative meaning of events in his pre-mortem life-story.[[112]](#footnote-112)

In the words of the Lovecraftian fiction podcast, *Welcome To Night Vale*, “Death is only the end if you assume the story is about you” (2015). The message here is hard to deny: unlike novels, which might end at the moment the protagonist dies, time marches onward in the real world regardless of whether we are still alive to see it. As Velleman puts it, in the real world, “There are no beginnings or endings in the flow of events” (2003, p.10).[[113]](#footnote-113) The upshot of this is therefore that, even when mortals die, there will still be things going on in the world involving the consequences of things which happened in their lives, and thus which can affect the narrative meaning of things in their life-stories, e.g. people interacting with one’s children, reading books one had written, living in the house one built, and so on.

In fact, the only way the events of a person’s life-story would *not* have revisable narrative meanings would be if there was nothing in the continuing world which could relate back to them or be influenced by them in any way. In other words, the only time an event’s narrative meaning will be fully and finally determined is when all of its effects and traces had petered out, leaving no mark in the world that it had ever taken place. In such an eventuality, we would finally be able to say, without doubt of this being revised, that we grasped the event’s eternally *fixed* narrative meaning. Nevertheless, we could now ask – especially now we know that narrative-meaning-revisability is not a problem for our life-stories comprehensibility – whether this is actually something we should desire. Indeed, when properly understood, the prospect of the narrative meaning of one’s entire life-story finally being fixed and unrevisable typically strikes us as being quite a bleak picture. It would be a world, as I’ve noted, in which no remnants of one’s life are left behind, a world which would look precisely the same even if one had never been born and this, as I will discuss in Chapter 7, is perceived by many as an especially depressing and even *meaningless* image of our future.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Moreover, the prospect of the narrative meaning of past events in one’s life-story being flexible and re-writable can be seen as an actively positive thing. Fischer, for one, observes it seems to be *bad* that death deprives us of “the possibility of changing the narrative meaning of the past” (2005, p.390). For instance, immortal beings who possess this capacity would always have the potential to recast an early failure as the first step on the road to a future success, or enhance the narrative meaning of some already good event by putting it to even further good use. Therefore, it could even be seen as an explicit *benefit* of immortality that it would always be within one's power (to a certain extent) to re-write one’s past by involving it in one’s current and future life-story. In a similar spirit, Tabensky writes that the fact that “the meaning of a particular segment of a life is not fully determined... is not a problem, since this ongoing mystery helps give life its vital impetus” (2003, p.67).

To conclude this section, it was argued that, even if we see an immortal’s life as a story made up of *many* sentences, because this story would never end, the narrative meaning of its events would always be open to revision, and so one would never be able to fully comprehend its content. Nevertheless, I have argued that the revisability of the narrative meaning in our life-stories is actually something which can affect both mortals and immortals, at least in as much as death does not itself *fix* the content of one’s overall life-story. However, I have also argued that this should not be a problem for the meaningfulness of mortal or immortal lives; just because one may come to understand the events of our life-stories differently in the future, that does not mean that any *present* understanding of them must be wrong or incomplete. One can fully comprehend an event both before and after certain facts about it change. Moreover, I have also noted that this revisability of narrative meaning can be seen as a positive thing: having it means that negative chapters can be recast in a more positive light, and lacking it entails that all traces of one’s existence have disappeared from the universe, which seems to be prima-facie undesirable.

Arguably then, a life-story can be comprehensible in theory even if events within it are open to future revisions in a certain sense. However, there are two more issues a mortalist might have with regard to the comprehensibility of immortal life-stories: first, that they lack the right kind of ending, and second, that it would be impossible to comprehend what might be called their ‘overall shape’ or ‘grand narrative’. I will discuss these complaints in the following sections.

5.3 The closure argument

Joshua Seachris argues that the endings of narratives have a particular “retroactive” or “proleptic” power which allows them to affect the rest of the narrative in a way unlike any other moment within it (2011, p.145). Specifically, he claims “the way a narrative ends, in virtue of its being the end, has great power to elicit a wide range of broadly normative human responses on, possibly, emotional, aesthetic, and moral levels towards the narrative as a whole” (p.144). Seachris also quotes Velleman in support of this claim, who explains that the power endings have has something to do with our overall emotional engagement with the narrative:

“the emotion that resolves a narrative cadence tends to subsume the emotions that preceded it... Hence the conclusory emotion in a narrative cadence embodies not just how the audience feels about the ending; it embodies how the audience feels, at the ending, about the whole story” (Velleman, 2003, p.19).

However, Seachris adds that the endings of narratives do not just play a special role in determining our emotions about the overall narrative, but also our evaluation of it. In other words, the ending determines what we think about the *value* of the overall piece as well. For instance, if we imagine the story of a relationship, whether it ultimately ends in a break-up or with marriage is, according to Seachris “very important for how you view the relationship as a whole” (2011, p.145). Furthermore, although plausibly any event in a narrative could affect our attitudes towards what came before it, for Seachris, the power that endings have in this regard is unrivalled. He summarises: “the evaluative priority attached to narrative ending resides in its being the last word, a ‘word’ that brings with it the finality and indelibility of a settled normative stance towards the narrative as a whole” (p.146).

Reading Seachris’ comments, one might also infer that a story *without* an ending would be more difficult for an audience to form stable evaluations of compared to a story with an ending. Moreover, and relevantly for my discussion, one might also analogously think that a story without an ending would be more difficult for audiences to fully *understand*. In other words, as well as some sort of emotional catharsis, there may be a kind of intelligibility which narratives only possess when they have the right sort of conclusion. If they were to lack such an ending, however, the story might also end up lacking some substantial degree or dimension of comprehensibility. If this is true, to the extent that death provides a conclusion to our life-stories, it may also grant them a level of comprehensibility which an endless life-story simply could not have. The argument to be examined here could be stated along the following lines:

1. The ending of a narrative can bestow a level of comprehensibility upon the rest of the narrative, which it would lack if it did not have such an ending.
2. A life-story without an ending could not be adequately comprehensible.
3. For a life to be meaningful, the life must be coherent.
4. For a life to be coherent, the person’s life-story must be adequately comprehensible.
5. The life-stories of immortal beings would be narratives without endings.
6. Immortal beings could not have meaningful lives.

Simply put, the argument holds that a person’s life would not be coherent nor meaningful unless they died and thereby gave their life-story a conclusion.

Behrendt uses the term 'closure' to discuss variations of something like the thesis presented in premise 1. In particular, she defines 'strong closure' as the notion that the endings of life-stories have a particular “meaning-conferring role, in which the end can provide meaning that the life would otherwise lack altogether” (2014, p.336). With respect to the argument above, we can read this as the claim that all the moments or events in a story can only be properly comprehended partly in virtue of their relation to the *end* of the story. This strong claim is not without motivation though. For instance, one supporting observation is that, if a character or event was included in a story but it had no effect whatsoever on how the ending of the story turned out, we might wonder *why* it was included, and even think its inclusion in the story made little or no sense. Worryingly then, if a story had no ending at all for its parts to relate to, this might imply that *all* these parts were similarly lacking in intelligibility.

However, though it does make sense to suggest that events within a story are rendered intelligible partly in virtue of their relations to other events within the story (e.g. we can understand better why the protagonist did X when we understand what caused that action, and what resulted from it), and it also makes sense to suggest that the ending of a story is an important moment for such events to relate to (since, as the climax of the story, it is likely the locus of a lot of significant narrative connections), I don’t believe that strong closure is correct.[[115]](#footnote-115) In other words, even granting these observations, we still needn’t accept premise 2; it does not yet follow that the events of a story could not be adequately comprehensible, or even fully comprehensible, without the story having an ending which they then connect to in some way. To demonstrate that premise 2 is correct, the mortalist will have to provide some additional argument.

To start with, the mortalist might try to specify exactly what kind of ending they are talking about when they suggest that a life-story without an end would be lacking in comprehensibility. Seachris, for one, differentiates between a few species of 'ending'. First of all, he suggests an ending might simply be seen as the 'termination' of a particular thing, i.e. “just when something is over or finished, or ceases to exist” (2011, p.148). However, this does not seem to be the sort of ending which the mortalists’ argument could rely on. If a film projector broke down halfway through a movie, then that movie would have had an ending in the sense of a termination, yet there need be nothing special or intelligibility-conferring about the random frame it halted at. Indeed, any frame could become ‘the ending’ in this sense, provided the projector broke at the right moment, but it would be strange to suggest that every scene in the movie could somehow be imbued with this intelligibility-conferring power simply because it coincided with the movie’s termination. Similarly, I could tear the last hundred pages from a book and give it a new final sentence, but what about that act could possibly elevate that random sentence to the privileged position this argument requires?

In line with Behrendt’s terminology, a better suggestion would probably be to interpret ‘ending’ here as ‘closure’. But what *is* closure exactly? According to Noel Carroll, many art forms possess their own forms of closure; for instance, musical closure involves a certain sequence of notes or chords to conclude the piece, perhaps depending on its key, and poetic closure involves both “metrical and rhythmic structures [and] the use of contrasting moods and themes as a way of rounding off and closing up a sequence of verse” (2007, p.2). Distinctly *narrative* closure, on the other hand, Carroll defines as “the phenomenological feeling of finality that is generated when all the questions saliently posed by the narrative are answered” (2007, p.1).

In a remarkably similar account, Seachris also identifies 'closure' as a kind of ending (specifically, the one most relevant to the *meaning* of narratives) and defines it as “a contextually anchored settled stance with respect to a ‘problem’ or cluster of problems emerging within a given narrative or portion of that narrative” (2011, p.148). Thus, what is required for *narrative* closure, for both Seachris and Carroll, is that some mystery or puzzle conjured up by the narrative is given a solution. To clarify, Carroll explains that a narrative is like “a network of questions and answers” (2007, p.5). Certain events or actions in the plot naturally raise certain questions (e.g. ‘will she succeed in her quest?’, ‘will his hubris be his downfall?’ etc.), and the story only reaches narrative closurewhen these issues are put to rest, i.e. when the narrator has “answered all the questions that have stoked the audience's curiosity” (p.4).

To reiterate, what gives a story narrative closure is not its termination, but specifically that the story raises questions which are then answered. Carroll clarifies this by noting that not *all* questions raised by the narrative must be answered in order for narrative closure to be achieved, but at least the “presiding macro-questions” must be: i.e. the ones that over-arch the whole story, which may often be built up of many smaller 'micro questions' (p.5-6). Carroll deals with an objection at this point: why can't other kinds of text, such as philosophy essays, which raise and answer questions, also obtain 'narrative' closure? Carroll's answer to this is fairly straightforward: these things cannot have narrative closure because they are not narratives (p.10). This is because Carroll’s definition of a narrative requires it narrate over a *sequence of events*, many of which must have at least a certain level of causal relationship. Thus, a typical philosophy essay is simply *not* a narrative and so cannot have *narrative* closure.

On top of this, Carroll adds that what makes the answering of the questions raised in a text specifically *narrative* closure is the fact that the questions are directly related to the causal chain of the narrative’s story (p.12). For instance, if a character wonders aloud some irrelevant question about the capital of a country, the reader may come to desire the answer as well. However, whether the narrative actually provides an answer to this question would have no effect on whether or not it delivers narrative closure, since this question was not engendered by the actual *plot* of the narrative. On the other hand, in a 'whodunnit', the presiding macro-question to be answered is who committed the murder, and why. Since this question is provoked by the murder itself, as the causal event which instigates the rest of the narrative, finding out who the murderer is *would* be relevant to the narrative closure of the story. On this analysis, a philosophical text might also be able to obtain narrative closure but only if it were like a Socratic dialogue, with the philosophical answer at the end providing closure so long as the philosophical question was generated *because* of the causal 'nexus' of the narrative. Carroll summarises:

“The sorts of questions that are generated by the causal networks that contribute to connecting the past, present, and future in stories warrant being called narrative questions because of their intimate relation to an essential feature of narrative, and, furthermore, answering said questions provokes the phenomenological condition that deserves to be called narrative closure because the questions at issue have been generated narratively.” (Carroll, 2007, p.13)

Some support for Carroll's thesis can be found when we reflect upon our own reactions to certain aspects of narratives. For instance, if a plotline is raised in a film, and then abandoned, we can feel frustrated as we leave the cinema later on, as if the story had not *ended* properly. This can be explained by Carroll's account on the grounds that the introduction of the plotline raised questions which the film failed to answer. Hence, although the film would have ended in the sense of reaching its termination, it would have done so without providing complete narrative closure (p.6). We can also see, significantly, that there is some prima-facie connection between this *closure* and our impression of the comprehensibility and even meaningfulness of a narrative. Carroll points out that “many art films of the sixties withheld closure for the purpose of advancing the theme of the existential meaninglessness of contemporary life” (p.2). This seems accurate; when narratives end abruptly like this, that can indeed leave us feeling as though we haven’t been able to make sense of what we have seen, or that it was in some way disordered or unintelligible and not properly meaningful.

In light of the above claims about narrative closure, we can now start to better understand the mortalist argument outlined earlier. Essentially, the complaint is that an immortal’s life-story would be endless and, given this, it could never achieve narrative closure; i.e. it would never answer all the presiding macro-questions it raised. Therefore, given we would lack the answers to these important questions relating to the life-story, it seems reasonable to conclude that our understanding of the life-story would be incomplete. In conclusion, if a person’s life-story must be adequately comprehensible for their life to count as meaningful, then immortal lives might appear to be meaningless, not because the content of their life-stories is chaotic or absurd, but simply because the answers we need for them to be fully intelligible (and hence attain narrative closure) will never arrive.

Does this argument work in the way the mortalists want, however? First of all, we might wonder whether this kind of closure immortals are supposed to be missing out on is always going to be present in mortal life-stories as they seem to imply. The kind of presiding macro-questions mortal life raises are likely to vary wildly from person to person depending on their goals, experiences, and ambitions. Still, some examples might include: ‘will she pass this exam?’ ‘will she get married to Bill?’, ‘will her company avoid bankruptcy?’ etc. Now we must ask whether the life-story of a person like this would necessarily attain narrative closure simply because it is finite, and the answer appears to be ‘no’. Consider an example given by Carroll:

“Suppose a man keeps a diary, recording his affairs day by day. One morning he is run over by a truck and he dies immediately... Since this diary will be full of narrative connections, it will be classified as a narrative according to my approach. … But it will not have closure. Like poor XY's life, the diary ends abruptly.” (Carroll, 2007, p.15)

In this case it is clear that, despite the individual being mortal, his life-story seems to have ended without any real narrative closure, and it ended this way because his death came too soon for the narrative questions raised by his life to find their answers. The fact that we are mortal simply means that, at some point, our biological lives will be terminated, but this termination need not provide us with answers to the presiding macro-questions of our lives, and hence any narrative closure. In fact, the only questions which death could reliably answer would seemingly be of the form 'how will X die?' or ‘will X be able to do Y before he dies?’ but most lives may raise many questions besides these. As Michael Hauskeller notes, “Whether death interrupts [our] story or brings it to a satisfying conclusion probably depends on the kind of story it is” (2015, p.7), but I would suggest that, if we are living a life that stands any chance of being meaningful overall, our activities and concerns will almost certainly generate many macro-questions of many varieties, very few of which could be 'answered' by our deaths themselves: e.g. ‘will my children flourish?’, ‘will my artworks be well received?’, or ‘will my efforts to help the environment by effective long term?’.

Granting this, it seems that a mortal’s life-story could potentially terminate without reaching any narrative closure, just like other kinds of finite narratives.[[116]](#footnote-116) Nevertheless, considering the kinds of complex, open-ended, and possibly far-reaching questions our life-stories typically give rise to, we may even wonder whether it is strictly possible for *any* mortal life-story to have closure at the time of their death, under normal circumstances. Scarre has written that “One seemingly attractive way to think about death is as the *completion* of life... death may appear to be the neat conclusion of our story, the last full-stop that ends a well-told and finished tale” (2007, p.40). Nevertheless, we saw above that this is not always the case, and Scarre amongst others, rejects this attitude. For instance, he cites Karl Jaspers as claiming that “a life may have the character of completeness as a spectacle for others, but it never has that character in reality. Life remains a matter of tensions and goals, inadequate and unfinished” (Jaspers, 1970, p.200). Similarly, Raymond Tallis writes:

“We hope that, at the very least, our lives will come to an appropriate end when all that we hoped to achieve will have been achieved, that the story will be rounded off, that… the stories we started in our lives will have come to a satisfactory conclusion. This will not happen. There are too many stories, too disorganized… And there are new stories opening up all the time” (Tallis, 2015, p.20-1).

Thus, Tallis concludes, “the world lacks narrative neatness because it is too rich with abundance pouring in through the sides of any narrative” (p.21). In other words, one might doubt that even a mortal being’s life-story could ever attain narrative closure by the time of their deaths, simply because there will be too many plot-lines, and hence narrative questions raised within our lives, for us to ever find answers for them all.[[117]](#footnote-117)

Nevertheless, a mortal’s life-story might still be able to achieve closure at some point in the distant future if we grant, as I suggested in the section above, that one’s life-story can involve events that happen *after* one’s death. In this case, it would be as if the life-story had epilogue chapters detailing the important narrative-question-answering facts that occurred after the individual passed away. That way, mortals could die with many of their narrative questions unanswered, and hence without narrative closure, but their stories might still attain closure eventually once all their projects and commitments had finally played out.

It is also possible that theorists like Scarre and Tallis are being too pessimistic, however. It strikes me that *some* mortals might be able to secure answers to at least the macro-questions of their life-stories *during* the time they are actually alive. For instance, if a person had focused most of their energy on one large project and succeeded at the age of 60, then retired, it might seem as though their life-story had reached some measure of narrative closure even as they lived out their last few chapters. Indeed, Seachris agrees that it is theoretically possible for stories to reach closure before actually ending, stating that “closure could be present without a narrative terminating, at least in one important sense” (2011, p.149). In fact, one might argue that almost all traditional narratives do follow this structure, in a manner of speaking; although the physical pages of the book run out in, say, a fairy-tale, we do not imagine that all the characters die the moment the story finishes. The narrative of the prince and princess has closure when they finally get married because that provides the answer to the presiding macro-question raised by the story, but the characters, we imagine, were intended to go on living, merely in a state of problem-less bliss. As Seachris puts it: “closure can occur, even though the lives of the fictional characters in a narrative often presumably continue, as in *they lived happily ever after*” (p.149).

However, if it is possible for mortal beings to achieve narrative closure *within* their lives and before they die, shouldn’t this also be possible for immortal beings as well? Even though the lives of immortals might carry on forever, they would presumably also be able to achieve narrative closure in their life-stories so long as all questions that had been previously raised had found their answers. If we grant that closure can be attained in the lives of mortals whose lives nevertheless continue on (for a time), why deny the same for immortals? Seachris himself argues that the Christian 'meta-narrative' (which is just a species of narrative) – that we may live on in heaven for all eternity – reaches the relevant kind of narrative closure despite *never* 'ending' in the traditional sense of termination (p.149-150). Those who did not sin, according to some religions, will exist in bliss for eternity, but the main questions of their life-stories seem to have been answered: they seem to have narrative closure in their lives, despite living on for an infinite amount of time.

My counter argument to the mortalists is that *if* narrative closure provides a special kind of comprehensibility to life-stories, this is just as accessible to immortal beings as mortal ones. In fact, it would presumably be even *easier* for immortal beings to obtain, given they will have an infinitely longer amount of time in which to actively work towards finding answers to their lives’ narrative questions. Nevertheless, if any being managed to achieve narrative closure *within* their life, they would now, perhaps, be left in a problematic state. To explain: starting a new significant project could mean opening up new narrative questions which require answering, and thus destroying the narrative closure that had just been gained. Therefore, it may seem as though, where mortal beings could achieve closure and then die (or die and then achieve closure later on), securing it forever, immortal beings will be faced with a dilemma: either continue leading a life and thus never attain final narrative closure, or attain narrative closure but preserve it at the cost of essentially *ceasing* to live.

I don’t think this dilemma gets things quite correct, however. In fact, it strikes me that immortal beings stand to be able to both attain and preserve narrative closure *and* continue to live a reasonably full life. This is because, as I discussed in Chapter 4, it may be the case that immortal beings would eventually arrive at a time when every significant problem that faced society had been solved and every significant achievement had been completed, and the only things left to do would be to play sports and games (both traditional and the ‘games’ of certain defunct professions), pursue hobbies, socialise, and satisfy their various repeatable desires. In such a case, it seems as though *all* the presiding macro-questions in *all* the immortals’ lives would have found their answers because they would have seen them all through to completion. Hence, the significant plot-lines in their life-stories would have come to an end, and they would have reached a state of narrative closure. Moreover, much like the Christian afterlife, or the end of a fairy-tale, *because* there would be no more significant problems or quests for such immortals to face, no more macro-questions are likely to be raised, and so the narrative closure they would have attained does not seem to be risked or broken in any way by their continued living.

Alternatively, if one thinks that this sort of utopic end-state is unlikely, or that such an end-state *would* still give rise to new narrative questions, there is a further argument the mortalists’ opponent could fall back on. Specifically, one might deny that, after securing narrative closure, opening up new narrative questions would *destroy* the closure already gained. Rather, a more plausible way of interpreting the situation would be that the first plot or storyline of one’s life had reached closure, but that one was now entering into a second storyline, with its own brand-new questions. Thus, an immortal could proceed through life raising and answering bundles of narrative questions and securing narrative closure for each of those bundles in *succession*. Rather than being one long novel which lacked overall closure, the life could be seen as a *series* of novels which each possess their own closure relative to their own narrative questions. Thus, since every section of the life (except the current ongoing one) would have achieved closure, it seems that every section of the life could therefore possess whatever level of comprehensibility narrative closure allegedly provides.

In conclusion, the mortalists’ argument that only life-stories with endings can be adequately comprehensible does not pose a problem for immortal lives. This follows once we understand that the relevant kind of ‘ending’ here is best interpreted as narrative closure and acknowledge that narrative closure is something that appears open to both mortals and immortals alike. Mortals may find it difficult to achieve closure within their lifespan, given the nature many narrative questions may take, but it is likely that they would achieve closure eventually, as the various plotlines which their life touched come to an end. On the other hand, immortals will have an infinite time to actively *work* at securing answers to the narrative questions of their lives, but also much longer in which to raise new ones, so it is likely that reaching narrative closure may take even longer for such beings (or be something which they reach again and again in succession). Yet, we have no reason to think that narrative closure would be inaccessible to immortals simply because they never died; death, as we have seen, has little to do with it.

Finally, although my earlier arguments have not considered this possibility, one might also object to the notion that narrative closure is actually necessary for one’s life story to be *adequately* comprehensible. As a very brief case in point, there seems to be nothing problematically incomprehensible about Martin Luther King’s life-story, despite the fact that his primary project in life – fighting for racial equality in America – is still ongoing, and thus at least one of the narrative questions likely raised by his life (‘will the cause he fought for be successful in the end?’) has not yet been answered. I will say more on this point in Chapter 8.

5.4 The shapelessness argument

In the previous two sections, I have argued that the life-story of an immortal could still be comprehensible – and hence their life itself coherent and meaningful – despite the fact that the narrative meaning of events within it may be eternally revisable, and despite the fact that some believe, wrongly, it could not have a certain relevant kind of ending (which I have argued is ‘closure’). Nevertheless, the mortalist might still argue that, while it is true that one can comprehend any particular event or chapter within an immortal’s life-story, given these stories would be infinitely long, it would still be impossible to grasp the life-story’s plot *as a whole* in the way we can with short, finite, mortal lives. For instance, we might be able to say, about Einstein, that his life-story was the story of a scientist who discovered certain important and influential laws of physics. In other words, we can summarise what his life was *about*. Yet, for any immortal with an endlessly long life-story, it would arguably be impossible to sum up or grasp its *overall* plot.

Chappell seems to be aware of this worry, acknowledging that, “though an endless life will include many completed narratives, it will never, itself, be a completed narrative” (2007, p.36). Similarly, Fischer notes that, while an immortal life could be an ongoing narrative in many ways relevant to our discussion, and its individual events could have their own intelligible narrative meaning, the life as a whole would perhaps fail to possess a single “grand narrative” or “totalizing meaning” (2005, p.398). Continuing with this thought, he admits of immortal lives: “since the life as a whole has no ending, there is no possibility of achieving distinctively narrative understanding of the whole life” (p.399). Nevertheless, this fact does not appear to bother Fischer or Chappell too much, with both affirming that an immortal life could still be desirable and even meaningful despite it. In the rest of this section I will argue that they are correct to be unworried by this feature of immortal life-stories. However, in order to do that, we must first establish precisely what the problem is supposed to be.

If we were to build a mortalist argument from the above worry, it would presumably look something like the following:

1. For a life to be meaningful, the life must be coherent.
2. For a life to be coherent, the person’s life-story must be adequately comprehensible.
3. A life-story can only be adequately comprehended when one can examine and grasp its overall plot or shape.
4. The life-stories of immortal beings would have no overall plot or shape.
5. Immortal beings could not have meaningful lives.

5.4.1 Incompleteness

One way of interpreting this argument (and premise 3, in particular) is as resting on the notion that, for certain things, we can only understand or evaluate them properly when contemplating them as *wholes*, not just by examining their various parts independently. This thought is expressed quite commonly in the literature. For instance, both Brannmark (2003) and Scarre (1997) write that novels cannot be assessed simply by considering the quality of their individual chapters, we must also consider how all the chapters fit together. Similarly, Ismael argues that what makes a particular painting or sculpture meaningful is something “holistic” and “not reducible to the intrinsic quality of its parts” (2006, p.8). Granting this, he concludes that, “To apprehend the meaning of a painting, a sculpture, or a story, you need to survey the whole, to see how its parts are arranged” (p.8).

These authors all then make the analogy between these forms of art and human lives, concluding that we cannot provide a final assessment of the quality of a human life without considering the *entire* life at once. Brannmark, for example, asserts that “when we ask the question about whether a specific life is a good one it is a question that we cannot answer without understanding how that life is woven together as a whole in this sense” (2003, p.333). Scarre, too, writes that “We need to be able to see a life whole… to judge the significance of its constituent phases” (1997, p.274). And finally, speaking specifically of the coherence of a life, Ismael proposes that:

“when we survey our lives, like Ivan Ilyich on his deathbed [we must] pull ourselves back from the concerns that drive day-to-day activity, and we ask whether there was some coherence to the life. Does it form a unified whole?” (Ismael, 2006, p.8).

On such grounds, the mortalists might also potentially argue that we cannot judge a life-story as adequately comprehensible unless that life-story is completed and ready to be reviewed as a whole. Thus, this claim would entail that the only lives which can ultimately be meaningful are those which come to a close at some point, generating completed life-stories. Indeed, this general claim – that only *whole* lives can be bearers of meaningfulness (or some other value or quality) – is itself fairly commonly found in the literature, particularly among narrativists, as Behrendt notes (2014, p.333). For instance, along with the above examples, Kauppinen has indicated that his defended theory of meaningfulness is “clearly holistic” (2012, p.374), and Jerrold Levinson has argued that it is “a whole life being a certain complex way, and not its component experiences having certain characters, that is the real bearer of intrinsic value” (2004, p.326). To make things clearer, I will adopt Metz’s practice of referring to those who believe that meaningfulness (or coherence/comprehensibility) only attaches to *completed* lives or life-stories (and not individual events, achievements, or chapters), as ‘pure whole-lifers’ (2013, p.37).[[118]](#footnote-118)

If the pure whole-lifers are correct, then it seems to pose a serious problem for immortal lives. If it is true that only lives which are complete or whole can be meaningful, then it appears immortal lives, which are eternally incomplete, could never be granted any meaningfulness. Ismael makes this argument explicit when he asserts:

“it is only because we are born and die – i.e., because our lives are framed by birth on one end and death on the other – that they can constitute meaningful wholes.” (Ismael, 2006, p.9)

Specifically, with reference to the shapelessness argument above, the claim would be that only whole life-stories can be adequately comprehensible, and thus that only mortal beings could have comprehensible life-stories, because only mortal lives will ever be complete. Immortal beings’ life-stories, on the other hand, would be incomprehensible as wholes, because they simply won’t ever *be* whole. Thus, if adequately comprehending something means grasping it *all* in one go, and if we accept that the comprehensibility of one’s life-story is essential for one’s life to be meaningful, then immortal beings cannot have meaningful lives.

What can the mortalists’ opponent reply here? Their strongest move, I think, is to simply reject the mortalists’ claim that, for a life to be meaningful and coherent, one must be able to grasp the person’s entire life-story as a whole – i.e. *from start to finish*. The implication of the mortalists’ claims seems to be that, if one’s life-story cannot be comprehended in one go, all the way to its up *end*, then it must be incomprehensible in some sense. Yet, this needn’t follow. Instead, we can point out that immortal life-stories might not be comprehensible from start to finish, but they could still be adequately comprehensible in their entireties *so far*. In other words, everything that exists to be comprehended would be comprehensible, even if there was still more to be added.

It is hard to see why this would not be satisfactory – why it should not be sufficient for potential meaningfulness that an immortal’s life-story *so far* was entirely comprehensible, if comprehensibility is indeed all we require. The fact that no one would be able to comprehend the rest of their life – not because it would be *incomprehensible* but simply because it hasn’t happened yet – appears, on reflection, to be a strange reason for suggesting the life should be seen as meaningless. To be clear, my claim here is that there is nothing about a life being incomplete which implies anything negative about its actual intelligibility. It may be that no one could now, or ever, grasp what the entire *finished* plot of an immortal’s life-story would be*.* Yet, at any point in time, all the narrative that exists to be examined could be perfectly intelligible, and I see no good mortalist argument for thinking this should not be enough for coherence and potential meaningfulness.

5.4.2 Overabundance of plot

The incompleteness interpretation of the shapelessness argument does not hold much water. Nevertheless, there is another reason the mortalists could claim the overall plot or shape of immortal life-stories would be ungraspable: essentially because, aside from their incompleteness, there would simply be too *much* content in an immortal’s life-story for us to actually wrap our heads around. As Bortolotti expresses the worry:

“One common argument for the view that significantly longer life spans would compromise… the development of personal narratives that are central to the attribution of meaning to one's life [is that] If human beings were to live much longer than they currently do, then their lives would no longer be amenable to being structured narratively. This is because… In a very long life, various stages of the narrative may appear as discontinuous and fall short of forming a coherent whole.” (Bortolotti, 2010, p.40)

In short, immortal life-stories would cover so many thousands of years, and involve so many different projects, settings, and supporting characters, there would simply be no way of interpreting them as singular, unified narratives, and hence no way of understanding them as having any overall plot, even *so far*. In mortal lives this is more manageable because we only live for eighty years and so can only accomplish a limited number of things. Thus, it is easier (though not trivial, as I noted in section 5.1, since even mortal lives are quite messy), to sum up the overall plot of a mortal’s life. For instance, as I noted earlier, we can say what Einstein’s life was primarily about. Similarly, we could grasp and state, quite straightforwardly, the overall plot of Martin Luther King’s life, or Gandhi’s life, or Florence Nightingale’s. For immortal beings, on the other hand, as Bortolotti writes, “it is possible that coherence of life goals would be harder to maintain, because longer-living agents may live to develop diverse life goals which do not nicely fit in one overarching project” (p.41).

These complaints, that immortal life would be a story with an endlessly meandering trajectory, and with an incomprehensibly varied selection of contents, are both often expressed in the claim that an immortal life would have no ‘shape’: for instance, Terry Eagleton asks: “Could a human life which had no limit, stretching all the way to infinity, have a significant shape to it?” (2008, p.38); Scarre asserts “an unending life would be one that lacked any meaningful shape or pattern” (2007, p.58); and Fischer characterises his opponent as demanding to know, of immortal life, “How could we care about something essentially amorphous?” (2006, p.379). If I am correct, then this suggestion, that immortal lives or life-stories would be without shape or pattern, can be understood as the claim that they would have no overall trajectory or ‘grand narrative’, as Fischer called it. Chappell correctly points out that immortal life would be ‘shaped’ in that it would contain actions, projects, risks, and achievements to give it an ongoing *plot* just as a mortal life does (2007, p.36). However, the issue is that this plot would be so complex that there is nothing we could say about its overall structure, and it is that sense in which it would, allegedly, have no shape.

To understand this worry better, a metaphor might be useful. Fischer suggests we can imagine, as an analogy for immortal life, an electrocardiogram (a piece of medical apparatus which measures heart activity and displays it as a zig-zagging line) which lasts for an infinite amount of time (2006, p.379). Here it’s clear that there could always be a pattern of zig-zags on the screen, even if it continued updating eternally. Another way of putting it is that, if we were to imagine the screen was infinitely long, then the line could continue zig-zagging forever without ever becoming flat. If we imagine the ups and downs of the line correspond to the action in a life-story’s plot, we can see Chappell's point – that an immortal life could continue to have engaging projects – is essentially pointing out that the line needn’t ever become flat. However, as I’ve outlined, I believe the actual ‘shapelessness’ complaint being made is that an immortal life, despite potentially being filled with plot and sub-narratives, would fail to possess a *singular* *overall* narrative. In our electrocardiogram analogy, the complaint is that, despite the line never becoming flat, the graph drawn by the electrocardiogram fails to display any *overall* recognisable or graspable shape.

We can talk about the narrative trajectory of a novel or film, starting with an instigating event, continuing through rising tension and, after a dramatic climax, returning to the baseline. Similarly, when Scarre talks about the shape of a life he mentions the “arch-shaped structure of birth, growth, maturity, decline and death” (2007, p.58). All comprehensible and meaningful mortal life-stories, one might claim, can be plotted out as having a particular trajectory (even if not this exact one), with a particular overall shape or pattern to each. The graph for a mortal life might display a flick upwards, a curve downwards, then some jagged steps upwards again, or it might display the shape of the London skyline. Regardless, it will have some kind of a pattern that is graspable, in part perhaps, because it is *short* enough. An immortal life, on the other hand, goes on too long to be said to have any *particular* describable shape whatsoever; the ups and downs of the immortal electrocardiogram are so many and so complex that, despite never being flat, it fails to strike us as having any pattern at all.

To be clear, the worry under discussion is that the overall plot of an immortal’s life-story (even ‘thus far’) could not actually be all that intelligible because of the extreme variety and quantity of its contents. There are several retorts available to the mortalists’ opponent, however, each focusing on a potential motivation the mortalist might have for thinking that an easily graspable and summarisable overall plot is necessary for one’s life-story to be comprehensible. First, we can point out (as many writers have), that what makes a life-story good in the way needed for the life to be meaningful, is *not* what makes a story aesthetically valuable. It might be true that a novel will be more aesthetically pleasing if the protagonist goes through a plot arc which is simple enough for us to swallow in one piece (for instance, a fall from grace and then a triumphant return); however, we should be wary of assuming that a *life-story* must display a similarly simplistic pattern in order to be the story of a meaningful life. What is necessary is merely that it is intelligible (at least, that is the assumption we have been working under), not that it is intelligible in an aesthetically pleasant way.

Second, as noted in 4.3, there is a tendency to think of a life as meaningful when it has some *singular* easily stateable ‘meaning’ attached to it, in the form of, for instance, a purpose or achievement or storyline. This is possibly motivated by the prevalence of the question 'What is *the* meaning of life?' which seems to request some singular and snappy response. For example, James Bennett (1984, p.589) and Garrett Thomson (2003, p.5) both note the intuition that ‘the meaning of life’ could be provided as some kind of ‘simple formula’ or ‘fortune cookie’ message. Moreover, it would perhaps be more *satisfying* for us if there were a single easy, uncomplex answer to this question and, consequently, we might thus desire that our lives have a simple, easy-to-visualise narrative structure or primary plot-line that we could then hold up as *the* meaning of our lives.

However, I believe this desire may be misleading the mortalist. It might be satisfying for our lives to be made meaningful through a singular and unified project or storyline which we could present as ‘the’ meaning of our existence, as if our entire lives were merely a feature-length movie. Yet, we have no reason to think that such a satisfying and unified kind of life-story is actually necessary for meaningfulness. True, most if not all of our paradigmatic cases of meaningful lives tend to have 'a' meaning which can be summed up neatly (e.g. 'he ended slavery', 'she discovered radium'), but this may simply be because this is typical of short mortal lives; there is no reason to think that all meaningful lives must be similarly easy to sum-up. Consider the obituary of a person who lived a billion years; it might say 'John: father, philosopher, footballer, poet, scientist, politician, musician...' etc. While the obituary of a mortal being, Andrea, might only list 'mother' and 'doctor'. Now, is there any good reason to think that John's life is less likely to be meaningful than Andrea's simply because the story of her life is more easily *summarized*?

The issue at stake is the comprehensibility of our life-stories and I have interpreted the mortalists here as claiming that a life-story cannot be comprehensible unless it is possible to summarise its overall plot in an easy-to-grasp way. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case for other sorts of text; it can be perfectly reasonable and true to say that you have comprehended some book without being able to sum-up in a bite-size way, even in your own mind, what it is that you have comprehended. Take, for instance, a geography textbook. It seems clear that one could read such a book cover to cover, and understand *clearly* everything that was contained within it, but still be unable to bring to mind or convey what the book was *about* in any short, unified description. Similarly, very long novels like Infinite Jest can be entirely comprehensible from start to finish but defy any attempt to grasp their overall trajectory or grand narrative. Yet, despite having no graspable overall shape or pattern, it would be wrong to say that such stories were *in any way* incomprehensible. I believe the mortalists are equally mistaken if they believe that a difficulty in grasping the overall shape of an immortal’s life-story necessarily entails anything inadequate about its comprehensibility in general.

To conclude, it appears that a narrative can be considered comprehensible even if it has no easily graspable overall shape or trajectory, and even if one cannot comprehend it all the way to its *end* – since it is still being written – but can still comprehend it *so far*. Granting this, it seems like neither the endlessness nor the complexity of an immortal’s life-story should count as barriers to its comprehensibility. It is true that an immortal life might have no overall shape to it both because it has too much content and because it will never be finished, but this does not entail that the life-story itself would be at all unintelligible. So long as the individual plot-lines and chapters of an immortal’s life-story made sense to us, and we have seen no good reason to think they could not, the life-story can be considered adequately comprehensible, even if it could never be grasped as a whole. Thus, an immortal’s underlying life could similarly be considered coherent and hence meaningful, provided the life also includes sufficient quantities of both purposefulness and significance.

Things would be different, perhaps, if we assumed that any individual’s life-story was an attempt to convey just one message or just one storyline. That way it would perhaps be true that a life-story would have to be graspable all at once, so that the message or story could be pieced together properly. Nevertheless, the mortalist has no obvious justification for this assertion. Indeed, most mortal lives themselves cannot be seen as trying to convey just one message or demonstrate just one individual storyline; almost all current human lives, or good one’s at least, will involve a whole multitude of different plot threads, and this does not appear to pose a problem for their meaningfulness. Since neither mortal lives, nor immortal ones must be interpreted as trying to say just *one* thing therefore, there is no need to be worried about difficulties in grasping their overall shape or pattern: they needn’t have one.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have assessed several arguments which held that immortal life could not be meaningful because immortal lives would necessarily be incoherent. In the final section, I argued that immortal lives needn’t be seen as incoherent simply because the life-stories of such beings would have no overall graspable shape. Moreover, as I argued in the two sections before then, it is also unproblematic that an immortal’s life-story would not have an ending (in the sense of a termination), or that the ‘narrative meaning’ of events within it would be eternally revisable. In the latter case, revisability is not a barrier to comprehension of the life-story, and may even provide additional benefits. In the former case, the kind of ending which was relevant to comprehensibility was seen to be narrative closure, but this was demonstrated to be accessible to both mortals and immortals alike. In short, immortal life-stories do not suffer any problematic defects in terms of their comprehensibility when compared to mortal life-stories. Thus, to the extent an intelligible life-story is a requirement for meaningfulness, we have seen no reason to think immortals should be ruled as possessing meaningless lives.

Wrapping up this chapter, I have one final point to make: a possible explanation as to why mortalists may be commonly drawn to use narrative arguments to defend their position. Specifically, Scarre points out that thinking about our life-stories can often make us feel better, or more accepting, of our mortality. This seems to be because death can be portrayed as a neat and welcome conclusion to a full and satisfying story, rather than an interruption to an existence which could, in theory, have kept on going. Now, I have already given some reasons for thinking that death needn’t always (or even often) be a neat conclusion to our life-stories. Nevertheless, if we dig a little deeper into this spurious characterisation of death, it is possible to locate an even more insidious feeling or perception which narrativising our lives may engender: essentially, that if we imagine our lives are just like novels, then this could give us the impression that when *this* novel is finished, there will be the possibility of a sequel or, at the very least, some additional time to reflect on the story or even re-read it. Yet, as Scarre points out, we are not characters in novels, we are living creatures, and thus:

“When a life finishes, there is no prospect of a sequel; the leading character disappears forever on the last page... When the life finishes, the narrative self-destructs, leaving nothing behind beyond its memory in other minds. Death does not merely complete the story but eliminates it.” (Scarre, 2012, p.1085)

Narrativising our lives might provide some with a calm acceptance of death, and this perhaps explains the mortalists’ tendency to put their arguments in narrative terms. However, it may well be that this practice indicates a seriously misguided, if subconscious, attitude which such theorists take towards death: that death is merely the end of *this* story, with the possibility of more to come, rather than the complete annihilation of their subjective world. It is possible narrativising our lives could lead us to misinterpret the true nature of our mortality then, and thus draw the wrong conclusions about its relationship to meaningfulness.

Part Two: Conclusion

In Part Two of this thesis, I have examined the most prominent arguments that have been made in favour of the claim that immortality could not be meaningful. Nevertheless, having reconstructed these arguments and considered them closely, I found that none are successful. Immortal beings would continue to be engaged and live purposefully, for starters, despite suggestions to the contrary. Although I argued that deadlines and other forms of scarcity and fragility are not required for us to value things or be motivated to pursue them, I demonstrated that immortal life would still contain much scarcity and fragility, and many deadlines. Moreover, although I acknowledged that, as in mortal life, some sorts of boredom may strike immortal beings from time to time, I showed that there is nothing about immortal life which would render this boredom inescapable or eternally and entirely motivation-sapping.

Next, I demonstrated that many of the goals which immortal beings can and would pursue would still count as significant. The possibility of various (non-mortal) forms of risk and danger, as well as various obstacles and challenges in their world, mean that immortal beings would still face significant problems and hence have the opportunity to perform virtuous, challenging, and significant deeds. Moreover, although an immortal being’s contributions might not be as irreplaceable as the contributions of a mortal, given immortals would increasingly begin to share many of their experiences and skills over time, I demonstrated that such irreplaceability is not an essential requirement for significance or meaningfulness. Finally, while I acknowledged the possibility that immortal beings’ opportunity for original significant achievements might dry up after an incredibly long time, I argued that it would be wrong to consider their lives insignificant because of this, provided they had done some significant things prior to that point.

The last chapter of Part Two focused on defending immortal beings from the claim that they could not possess life-stories in the right way for meaningfulness, which I interpreted as a claim about the coherence or comprehensibility of their lives. Here, I acknowledged a few ways in which the life-stories of immortal beings might not be comprehensible in the same way as the life-stories of mortal beings (e.g. they could not be comprehended as eternally fixed narratives, or as narratives with an easily-graspable overall shape). Nevertheless, I argued that an immortal being’s life-story can be considered adequately comprehensible overall, without it being comprehensible in these specific ways.

In summary, there are some forces which may affect or reduce the meaningfulness of an immortal’s life somewhat, but we have seen nothing which entails they could not have reasonable levels of purposefulness, significance, and coherence in their lives, and hence nothing which entails their lives could not be meaningful overall. With this in mind, in Part Three of my thesis, I will move on to examine arguments that it is death, not immortality, which is in fact the true threat to the meaningfulness of our lives.

Part Three

6. Mortality and purposefulness

“Time in the shadow of the wing of the thing too big to see, rising.”

(Wallace, 1996, p.651)

In the previous chapters I have been examining arguments for the claim that mortality is somehow necessary for our lives to be meaningful. Granting my preferred account of meaningfulness – that a life is ideally meaningful if and only if it possesses sufficient levels of purposefulness, significance, and coherence – I chose to split these mortalist arguments into three sections pertaining to the component of meaningfulness they most closely related to. Chapter 3 examined arguments that immortal life would be absent of purposeful activity, Chapter 4 examined arguments that immortal life would be insignificant, and Chapter 5 examined arguments that immortal lives would be incoherent. In each case, I argued that these arguments were all ineffective; there is seemingly nothing about immortality itself which would prevent our lives from being sufficiently purposeful, significant, and coherent to count as meaningful overall.

In this part of the thesis, I will move on to discuss a claim which is precisely opposed to the one examined in the previous chapters: that death is not beneficial but is in fact disastrous for the meaningfulness of our lives, such that any mortal life must necessarily be meaningless *because* it is mortal. Those who hold this claim I will call ‘immortalists’ given their position entails that *only* immortal life could potentially be meaningful. Many theorists may reject this sort of claim without consideration. For instance, they might feel that their own life is meaningful or that famous figures like Gandhi or Martin Luther King lived meaningful lives, and thus conclude that mortality could not be incompatible with meaningfulness. However, for the purpose of my discussion, we must entertain the possibility that these kinds of intuitions are mistaken, and that even Gandhi, having now perished, ended up with a meaningless life.

An example of the immortalist school of thought can be found as far back as Ecclesiastes 2.14 (New International Version):[[119]](#footnote-119)

“The wise have eyes in their heads,

while the fool walks in the darkness;  
 but I came to realize

that the same fate overtakes them both.

Then I said to myself,

“The fate of the fool will overtake me also.  
 What then do I gain by being wise?”  
 I said to myself,  
 “This too is meaningless.”  
 For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered;  
 the days have already come when both have been forgotten.  
 Like the fool, the wise too must die!”

Since then, the fear that mortality renders our lives meaningless has been expressed again and again: for instance, Albert Camus asserted that “If nothing lasts then nothing is justified: anything that dies has no meaning” (1962, p.73); Kurt Baier asked “How can there be any meaning in our life if it ends in death? What meaning can there be in it that our inevitable death does not destroy?” (1957, p.105); and William Lane Craig wrote “If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life? Does it really matter whether he ever existed at all?” (1994, p.42). In fact, R W Hepburn notes that some writers “virtually identify the question of meaningfulness with the question of immortality: deny immortality and you necessarily deny meaningfulness” (1966, p.132).

Nevertheless, although this claim is fairly commonly made, it is less common for writers to actually articulate why mortality is supposed to be so incompatible with or destructive of our lives’ meaningfulness. Perhaps it is thought to be self-evident, and that one only need to face death honestly to be confronted with this unpleasant but undeniable truth. However, for something so important, and directly contradictory to what others have claimed about mortality and meaningfulness, some arguments or supporting reasons are clearly needed. Unearthing, formalising, and evaluating such arguments and reasons will be the aim of this and the following two chapters. As in Part Two, I will divide these arguments into three themes, those dealing with purposefulness in this chapter, and those dealing with significance and coherence in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively.

6.1 Mortality and motivation

In Chapter 3, I began by discussing and rejecting what I called ‘the motivation argument’: the claim that an awareness of our immortality would strip our motivation to do anything, since our lives would no longer involve any deadlines. This argument appeared to be partly inspired, in some cases, by the observation that diagnoses of terminal illnesses can often make people live their lives more urgently and passionately than before. Nevertheless, perhaps there is something to be said for the opposite response: mortality *de*motivating rather than motivating. Indeed, there are presumably countless anecdotal examples of terminal diagnoses bringing on deep depressive episodes and a *lack* of interest in pursuing one’s goals. One famous example of death acting as a demotivator comes directly from the diaries of Leo Tolstoy:

“Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things?” (Tolstoy, 1905, p.9).

Despite being a famous and celebrated author, Tolstoy’s reflections on mortality led him into a state of ennui so powerful he ceased to see the point in carrying on with any of his projects. This motivational collapse, according to Tolstoy himself, was only cured when he developed his own religious faith. At least in Tolstoy’s case, an awareness of mortality destroyed his sense of purpose in life, and he only regained it when he took up certain Christian beliefs – a religion which, perhaps not coincidentally, promises an eternal afterlife.

There is thus fairly clear evidence that mortality *can* demotivate us, and that our motivation, and hence purposefulness, might be regained through a belief in immortality. Nevertheless, if the immortalist wishes to argue that mortality is incompatible with meaningfulness because it prevents us from wanting to engage with life universally, this would obviously be mistaken. Although thoughts of death can sometimes trouble us and even rob us of our passion for life, this sort of affliction clearly does not affect everyone (or if it does, only temporarily) because most people appear to be living undeniably purposeful lives; every day across the world, mortal humans get out of bed and head to their jobs in offices, factories, or construction sights, or else go shopping, organise parties with their friends, or work on their hobbies.

This does not mean that there are no purposefulness-related arguments the immortalist can make, however. What the immortalist must do instead is argue not that mortality destroys our motivation to act whatsoever but that, despite our lives typically being full of activity, this activity does not count as properly purposeful in the right way. Specifically, in 6.2, I will examine arguments which hold that the activity of our mortal lives is, in fact, *pointless* and, in 6.3, I will examine arguments which hold that our life’s work is *futile*. In each case, this pointlessness or futility is then supposed to undermine the purposefulness of our actions. However, the truth of this claim is ultimately beside the point since, as I will argue, our actions as mortal beings are *not* universally futile or pointless.

6.2 The supermarket regress argument

This section will deal with one of the two claims outlined above: that mortal life is meaningless because our activity is ultimately pointless and thus purposeless. In this case, I think pointlessness does indeed entail purposelessness; if a person’s actions were aimed at nothing, we would not say they were acting purposefully, at least in one natural sense of the word. Moreover, pre-reflectively, our mortality can often lead to thoughts that our lives indeed have no point. As Robert Solomon describes, “The realization of our impending death can be paralyzing. Every aim, every pleasure, and every good deed seems to be rendered pointless” (2006, p.116).

What *reason* would an immortalist have for suggesting that all our actions are pointless though? After all, it appears as though our everyday lives are full of goal-directed acts, from putting toast in the toaster, to driving to one’s office, or the laboratory where one is researching a cure for cancer. Indeed, the claim that none of our actions have even *instrumental* goals would be patently absurd. However, what the immortalists could argue, with slightly more plausibility, is that although many of our actions have instrumental goals, none of them are aimed at achieving anything *final*. In other words, everything we do is for the sake of something else, which is for the sake of something else, and so on, with nothing ever standing as the final vindicating *point* of any of it. Thomas Nagel presented this thought in the following way:

“because we are going to die, all chains of justification must leave off in mid-air: one studies and works to earn money to pay for clothing, housing, entertainment, food, to sustain oneself from year to year, perhaps to support a family and pursue a career – but to what final end? All of it is an elaborate journey leading nowhere.” (Nagel, 1971, p.717)

Again, the basic idea is that our lives are ultimately purposeless, and therefore meaningless, because nothing we do serves any ultimate goal; although our daily actions have instrumental purposes, such as keeping us alive and healthy, we do nothing besides such self-perpetuation to justify the effort. As Nagel put it, our ‘chains of justification’ do not lead anywhere.We justify going to work because it earns us money. We then spend this money on things such as rent, bills, and food in order that we remain alive, and things like clothes, toiletries, and petrol for our cars in order to retain our position in society and, crucially, our jobs, so that we can continue to earn money. Each action is justified with regard to something we need to maintain or secure in order for us to keep living, but what we are lacking, allegedly, is the *point* of living itself.

The apparently infinite regression of instrumental goals in our lives would arguably mean that nothing we do has any real purpose. This would be revealed if we imagined the chains of instrumental goals stretching on infinitely without ever connecting to anything final. However, it could also be revealed if we imagine perishing: our deaths exposing the absence of any anchor at the end of this chain, and hence the pointlessness of all our efforts, which succeeded in nothing more than preserving our biological lives for a certain number of years without accomplishing anything else. In Nagel's terms, the chains of justifications which lead out from the efforts of our lives stretch into the future only so far till eventually death breaks a link in the chain and this string of for-the-sake-of's is left dangling.

Similar accounts of this worry can be found in Camus, who laments the monotonous cycle of “Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday according to the same rhythm” (1942a, p.19). However, to reiterate, what is particularly threatening to meaningfulness here is not simply that our lives are often repetitive and dull, but that all that work *goes nowhere*. More precisely, the work leads to nothing but more and more work. Joel Feinberg calls this problem 'the supermarket regress':

“Why are all those people standing in line before the cash registers? In order to purchase food. Why do they purchase food? In order to stay alive and healthy. Why do they wish to stay alive and healthy? So that they can work at their jobs. Why do they want to work? To earn money. Why do they want to earn money? So that they can purchase food... Vindicating purpose and meaning are constantly put off to another stage that never comes, and the whole round of activity looks more like a meaningless ritual-dance than something coherent and self justifying.” (Feinberg, 1992, p.163)

For this argument to support the immortalists’ position, however – that only immortal beings could have meaningful existences – it must be the case that the pointlessness of our actions is somehow *necessitated* by our mortality. Otherwise our mortal lives could be meaningless, but it would not be our mortality’s fault, and neither would immortality necessarily avoid this problem. Indeed, it would certainly be possible for immortal beings to spend their lives doing nothing other than working towards instrumental goals. The immortalist therefore needs to claim that our lives are afflicted by this ‘supermarket regress’ specifically *because* we are mortal. Nevertheless, I think potential justification for such a claim is within reach; after all, the fact that so much of our lives is filled with the toil of payed employment, bodily-maintenance, and shopping for groceries is because we would *die* if we ever stopped. Thus, one could argue that it is indeed our mortality which means our waking lives are devoted to activities which achieve nothing but keeping us alive since, if we were immortal, merely keeping alive would presumably require no effort.

The supermarket regress argument could be stated formally as follows:

1. Because they are mortal, human beings must expend all their effort to achieve nothing more than mere self-preservation.
2. There is no point to keeping oneself alive just for the sake of staying alive.
3. Effort expended to no final point is not purposeful.
4. The efforts of mortal human beings are not purposeful.
5. If a life is not sufficiently purposeful, it cannot be meaningful.
6. Mortal human life cannot be meaningful.[[120]](#footnote-120)

Does this argument work though? In response to something like the supermarket regress worry, Julian Baggini writes:

“When asked what the purpose of life is, many will say that we are essentially here to help others. This is what allows us to break free of the pointless cycle of eating to live, living to work and working to eat.” (Baggini, 2005, p.59)

Nevertheless, this reply alone is not enough to defeat the argument because, rather than providing a final anchoring point to our infinitely regressive cycle of justifications, it simply expands it to involve others as well. As Neil Levy argues, for “the parent who acquires meaning from raising children who shall acquire meaning by becoming parents in turn. Why should this kind of circle be any more significant than the first?” (2005, p.180). Similarly, Richard Taylor observes of our everyday labour:

“Most of such effort is directed only to the establishment and perpetuation of home and family; that is, to the begetting of others who will follow in our steps to do more of the same. Everyone's life thus resembles one of Sisyphus' climbs to the summit of his hill, and each day of it one of his steps, the difference is that whereas Sisyphus himself returns to push the stone up again, we leave this to our children.” (Taylor, 1970, p.24)

While helping others and raising children gives our life some purpose beyond mere *self*-preservation then, it does nothing to give our activity any ultimate point. Instead of working just to keep ourselves alive, we are also working to keep other humans alive as well. Yet, in the absence of some goal or purpose for human life itself, activity aimed at nothing more than the preservation of the species will still be ultimately as aimless as activity aimed solely at preservation of the self.

There is a much more powerful and perhaps obvious response to the supermarket regress argument, however: that our lives are made up of more than ‘sheer drudgery’, and so the supermarket regress is not, in fact, an accurate portrayal of all human activity (Feinberg, 1992, p.163). In essence, the argument fails because it assumes that nothing we do is ever done for the sake of anything besides mere survival, but such a premise is provably wrong. Feinberg, for one, asserts that humans do many things which are consciously and unconsciously aimed at other sorts of ends – ends which hold their own 'vindicating value' (p.163). Similarly, Nagel rejects the argument because:

“Chains of justification come repeatedly to an end within life... No further justification is needed to make it reasonable to take aspirin for a headache, attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, or stop a child from putting his hand on a hot stove. No larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless.” (Nagel, 1971, p.717)

The objection is clear: if one actually spends time thinking about the activities of one's week, it becomes apparent that we in fact spend a good deal of time (though perhaps less than we'd like) doing things that do not feed into the cycle of work and self-maintenance, primarily or at all. We read books, we engage in hobbies and creative work, we spend time with friends and loved ones, and we eat and drink for pleasure, not just fuel. Thus, the conclusion that life is purposeless and meaningless can no longer be secured through this argument. Since premise 1 is false, the rest falls flat. At least some of the activity of our lives is consciously aimed at ends outside of the 'supermarket regress' – ends which we can and do often achieve – thus, our efforts are not all pointless and our lives are not necessarily meaningless.

Furthermore, given these other ends, the apparently aimless or instrumental activity of daily life is also redeemed to a degree; because continued existence is a requirement for us to enjoy that novel, finish that piece of knitting, or spend time with our friends, all the work we put into mere survival has the potential to be justified after all. We spend 40 hours a week working, not just to afford us the opportunity to keep living, but so that we can do all the other things we want to do with our lives. This effort is not therefore obviously pointless or purposeless in the end, since it contributes instrumentally to our attaining other *final* goals which matter to us. In addition, as Feinberg notes, “Some activities carry their own point within themselves, and for that reason, whatever their envisioned or actual consequences they are not 'pointless'“ (1992, p.168). For the lucky individuals who find pleasure or fulfilment in whatever it is they do to earn money, their life would not be pointless even if this 'work' was all they did. For such a person, the satisfaction of performing the labour itself is perhaps justification enough for their effort, even if the work contributes to no other aim besides self-preservation.

What the above argument does show is that, if a person finds no fulfilment or joy in their employment, their work contributes to no final goals of theirs, and their life contains nothing *outside* of the grind of living, then that person's life may well be pointless and meaningless. Because the only activities they are engaged with serve no end but keeping them going, if they find nothing else to actually do with their life, then that effort will have all been for nought when they inevitably die. Their life's work will have amounted to no more than a hopeless attempt to postpone their inevitable demise. This conclusion seems right to me, however; unless the described individual had somehow made a dreary game out of living and was trying to see how long they could survive as some sort of challenge, it's incredibly difficult to see how the life could be said to have a point or be meaningful.

To summarise this section, it appears that death does not guarantee our lives are pointless and therefore meaningless according to the supermarket regress argument. Nevertheless, we should be wary of spending too much time on work that does not contribute to any final goals of ours. Specifically, we should be wary of falling into the trap of sacrificing our hobbies and joys to make more room for our careers, especially if we find no fulfilment in the work itself. In short, efforts to perpetuate life can avoid pointlessness, and hence meaninglessness, only if our life serves some final aim, even if that aim is merely to continue enjoying our work or hobbies.

6.3 The interruption argument

This section will discuss the charge that mortal life is not properly purposeful because all our efforts are futile. Though it is true that futile activity still seems purposeful in a sense, provided we define futile activity as being aimed at a goal which it cannot or will not accomplish, it certainly does not seem to be purposeful in the way we might think is required for meaningfulness. For instance, we would not say the actions of a person who spent all day trying to draw a square circle or walk to the moon were *meaningful* actions, and this would not just be because they are incoherent and produce no value, but because they are not *meaningfully* directed towards anything. The immortalist argument to be considered now is thus that, although our lives are full of activity, this activity is not purposeful in the way meaningfulness requires because it is characterised by futility, *and also* that this futility is caused by our mortality in some way.

Camus seems to be suggesting that mortality renders life futile when he writes, of death and life respectively, “Under the fatal lighting of that destiny, its uselessness becomes evident” (1942a, p21). Yet, why should we think this is so? One idea can be found in the writing of Jenann Ismael, who makes an analogy between life and painting a canvas, and suggests that the most tragic deaths are the one’s which leave our canvases ‘half-finished’ (2006, p.9). This points us in the right direction, I think; death could plausibly render our activity futile when it *interrupts* our projects before we have had the opportunity to complete them. For instance, if I died while halfway through writing this thesis, then my death may have rendered all my writing futile since it was aimed at a goal which would never be reached. Martha Nussbaum phrases the argument this way:

“Any death that frustrates hopes and plans is bad for the life it terminates, because it reflects retrospectively on that life, showing its hopes and projects to have been, at the very time the agent was forming them, empty and meaningless. Our interest in not dying is an interest in the meaning and integrity of our current projects. Our fear of death is a fear that, right now, our hopes and projects are vain and empty.” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.207)

Similarly, Geoffrey Scarre writes: “Death damages the meaningfulness of our lives when it cuts us off in the middle of our projects, making our best efforts futile, or when it deprives us of the chance to fulfil our potential” (2007, p.60). This claim appears fairly hard to deny; unless we are lucky enough to die at a moment when we have no ongoing projects, it seems there could always be some efforts of ours which will be wasted because they aim for goals which our death blocks us from achieving. These efforts would thus have been futile to begin with, and futile because of our mortality – specifically, the fact that we died before we could complete them.

However, one might now argue that the harm done by death here needn't be seen as rendering our life’s work *entirely* futile, and hence our lives entirely meaningless. After all, death might make *some* of our projects futile but only the ones which were ongoing at the very end of our lives. On the other hand, everything we had completed before the moment of our deaths would be safe and could not be affected or rendered futile by our demise. The only case in which our life’s work would be made entirely futile by our death would be if we had only one project and death interrupted it. Provided we have more than one project and get some completed in advance – and, as Scarre notes, human lives are typically long enough to allow for this (2007, p.211) – then death will presumably only introduce a little futility into our lives. Yet, it seems unlikely this effect would be so strong as to prevent them being meaningful.

Moreover, for death to render our work on a project *totally* futile, it wouldn't just have to be that it prevented *us* completing it, it would have to be that nothing came of the project whatsoever. Yet, sometimes our interrupted projects can still bear fruit. For instance, Kafka died before finishing his novel *The Castle*, but what he had written was still published to (eventual) acclaim. Thus, it does not seem like his work was rendered entirely futile by his death. Similarly, there are some projects which others can finish *for us,* which may also bear fruit even if we die before seeing their completion. Finally, even if something prevents a project from ever being completed or brought to fruition by anyone, the effort we put in needn’t be seen as entirely wasted; for many projects there may be valuable by-products that come out of the activity, even if it is just the pleasure of the work itself, and these can be enough to render the work non-futile. As Michael Sigrist notes:

“To the extent that one engages in and values activities which are ends in themselves, pursuing them is its own reward, and while death might deprive one of some future enjoyment of those activities, it cannot render what one has already done or is doing a waste.” (Sigrist, 2015, p.84)

In summary, death does not appear to render all our efforts futile: firstly, because it needn't interrupt *all* of our projects, just the ones that were unfinished at the time of our demise; secondly, because even the projects death interrupts would not have been entirely futile if they could be completed by other people after our death; and thirdly, because the primary or stated goal of a project needn't be the only thing of value produced by our efforts. Thus, the interruption of death, and its potential to introduce some futility into our lives, does not seem like a catastrophic problem for the overall meaningfulness of our lives.

Moreover, we can try to minimise the harm that death will do to the meaningfulness of our lives by carefully planning how we use our time so as not to leave too much at stake as we draw closer to death. It would be foolish to deliberately save embarking upon one's most important and life-defining quest at the age of 90. Instead, we should try to get this sort of work done earlier, or find a way to pass the torch on to someone else, so that the project can be completed – saving our efforts from being in vain. There are also various things we can do to wrap-up our lives as we anticipate them ending. As Scarre suggests, “there will normally be steps we can take to conclude or wind down our projects, discharge our responsibilities, pay our debts both literal and metaphorical, and... In this way we can provide our lives with some degree of closure” (2007, p.40). This practice of managing our lives so as to limit the damage death can do to us is termed 'thanatization' by Stephen Luper (1996).

While this thanatization makes sense to some degree, there is obviously a limit to how far we should take it, however; completely emptying our lives of any projects or objects of value would eliminate much of the harm done by our deaths but only because we would have made our lives that much less valuable to begin with. As Scarre points out, it would be like destroying our property today to prevent it being destroyed by vandals tomorrow (2007, p.104). Furthermore, since death does not always come in old age but can arrive at any time, the only way to be sure you were protected against death's harm would be to start thanatizing your life as soon as you were born. If death is bad because it takes something of value from us – our flourishing lives – then we can cheat death completely only by living empty lives to begin with. However, this is an obvious case of the cure being worse than the disease. A more balanced approach to life-planning, based on our best guesses about the time we have left, would probably be wisest and best with regard to the meaningfulness of our lives. In particular, we should make some attempts to do meaningful things even if that puts us at risk of some of our actions being futile to some extent. In this sense, life is a little like gambling: you have to play to win.

The issue of death and futility may now appear settled but there is perhaps a way of resurrecting the problem if we see life as Chappell does: “a rope of overlapping threads, significant projects, some of which at any time are not yet fulfilled or otherwise still continuing” (2007, p.34). Chappell then states something like the problem discussed above using this metaphorical language:

“Wherever a good life is ended by death, there will always be broken strands, projects of meaning that are left unfulfilled. How much this fateful cutting of the threads will destroy the overall meaningfulness of the life depends on the importance of the threads that get cut. But wherever it occurs, it frustrates something important” (Chappell, 2007, p.34).

This gives us reason to try to avoid death and prefer immortality, Chappell argues, since immortality is free from this threat. However, what is interesting is that, if we take the metaphor seriously, despite a cut only affecting the last few strands of a life, given these strands were all being woven together, it would actually constitute the severing of the overall rope. Similarly, we might worry that, although death only interrupts our last few projects, if those projects themselves were woven together with all our earlier ones as part of a larger meta-project, then the interruption of death could plausibly render the entire meta-project futile, not just the final few projects it actually cuts short.

In such a case, the entire life could be seen as being like a classical music concert that never moves past its introductory section, as Hepburn writes (1966, p.133), or as Sigrist puts it, like the building of a house which is blown down by a tornado the second it is finished (2015, p.84). Very much in line with the present argument, Sigrist continues: “If I built the house in an area that was guaranteed to have a tornado, then my efforts were futile from the start. Death can make life seem futile in this way” (p.84). In other words, if our lives are interpreted as bearing the structure of just *one* overarching project, then the interruption of death becomes much more dangerous, and can threaten *everything* we do with futility.

Nussbaum argues something much like this in *The Therapy of Desire.* She starts by pointing out that, even in cases when someone had died immediately after completing some big project, “we feel that it is frequently a loss in value to the person that he or she had a life that stopped short at that moment of completion, not permitting her to pursue different future projects, or to undertake that one again” (1994, p.210). Moreover, there are other ways death can count as an interruption, even when there are no conspicuous projects left unfinished. For instance, for a husband or wife who dies:

“even if death does not catch the spouse poised in the midst of some specific act or concrete plan that is cut short by the death, there is a larger and deeper sort of interruption here: the interruption of the project of being married, and leading the way of life characteristic of marriage, with its habits, its vague and concrete plans, hopes, wishes.” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.210)

Nussbaum then suggests that there are many such vague, long-term projects that make up our lives, alongside something like marriage. Thus, whenever death comes, Nussbaum argues, it will always be an interruption to many of our important temporally-extended life processes. In short:

“At the deepest level, there is, when death arrives, the interruption of every one of these patterns of life – of work, of love, of citizenship, of play and enjoyment: the interruption, then, of a project that lies, however vaguely and implicitly, behind them all: the project of living a complete human life.” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.210)

The earlier response to the interruption argument observed that death only poses a problem for the final ongoing projects of our lives, since only they are unfinished, and risk being made futile. However, from Nussbaum's point of view, it actually appears as though the effect of death can be cast back over the entire life since the smaller projects of our lives are woven together into one larger project of ‘living a compete human life’, and death cuts-off this overall meta-project. Death never comes at a good time, therefore, because it seems as though we *always* have unfinished business, in as much as we could have continued leading this human life-project, and death prevents us from finishing that business.

This thought, of death harmfully interrupting our meta-project of living a human life, chimes with some of the comments referenced in my discussions in Chapter 5. There, some mortalists were arguing that death could be seen as the completion of life, specifically as the satisfying conclusion to our life-story. However, I argued along with others that this treatment of death seemed to oversimplify the situation. Just because a death comes at the end of a life does not mean it rounds it off nicely or brings it any closure; death can sometimes be an *interruption* to our life-stories rather than a neat conclusion. Nussbaum's claims here indicate that she believes the former is not just common but unavoidable. In other words, death *always* comes before we are finished with our life-story/life-project. As Raymond Tallis expresses it: “Death is not a neat full stop at the end of the final sentence, of the final paragraph, of the final chapter, of a life. It is the profoundest of all interruptions” (2015, p.11).

Nevertheless, if the argument under consideration is that death renders our lives futile because it necessarily interrupts some overarching project we are all supposed to be engaged in, this project must be characterised, otherwise we could simply reject that we *are* involved in such a project. For some effort to be seen as futile, it needs to be futile *with respect* to some goal, but we have not seen what goal this meta-project is supposed to be aiming towards. Without such a goal, then there is no reason to see our efforts as being weaved into this overarching project. Thus, death could not render the activity of our life futile because there was never any all-encompassing end that the activity was futile *for*. Death would then return to being a minor interruption to *some* of our projects, but unthreatening to meaningfulness overall (on these grounds at least).

So is there a goal to the human life project? There certainly doesn't seem to be an explicit one, at least not one that is consciously shared by everyone. However, perhaps there is some general aim which we do all unconsciously have in mind while leading our lives. For instance, some theorists, such as Max More (1990), have connected meaning in life to self-development, understood as a process of growth and personal betterment in various ways. Similarly, John Cottingham argues that it is possible to see ourselves on a kind of journey:

“a journey of self-awareness and self-improvement, aimed at continuing moral growth and the deepening our understanding of ourselves and others. ...meaning arises when we are able to fit the events of our lives into a framework that displays them as stages in a journey towards greater self-awareness and moral self-development.” (Cottingham, 2009, p.28)

Taking this suggestion seriously, we could perhaps see death as threatening to make our lives futile by interrupting our implicit project of personal self-development. Moreover, such futility may even be inevitable if we see this project as potentially endless. Indeed, 'self-development' sounds less like a goal and more like a direction we might travel in or a metric according to which we might make progress. Supporting this interpretation, Michael Hauskeller (2015) argues that, in More's case at least, the project of self-development is best understood as 'open-ended'. Furthermore, this interpretation also seems to fit Cottingham's theory, notably when he mentions that the reality of the human condition is that there is *always* something “unrealized and deferred about our aspirations” (2009, p.28).

Another possible goal of the human life project might simply be the pursuit of more and more possibilities and opportunities for experience and achievement (or perhaps, pursuit of all the ones that are significant, or all the one's we care about). Scarre, for instance, seems sympathetic to such a claim (at least, that is how Hauskeller (2015) interprets his position), when he asks:

“Should we become a philosopher or a footballer, a concert pianist or a world-traveller? If we had an extra century, we could be them all... the shortness of our lives prevents our making use of more than a fraction of our potential. Even the longest of lives in the actual world is telescoped to the point of absurdity.” (Scarre, 1997, p.278)

On such grounds, it is possible to see death as interrupting our implicit project of ‘living a well-rounded life’, in the sense of completely exploring all the possibilities open to us. Kathy Behrendt also expresses a similar worry about the interruption of death using narrative language:

“If we see life as ‘projecting towards a future’, in which certain possibilities may be realised in accordance with a certain narrative trajectory or structure, it seems hard to avoid the view that death at any time is abhorrent, because it deprives us of the fulfilment of all possibilities.” (Behrendt, 2007, p.146)

The problem that death allegedly poses here is that it halts us in our attempt to take advantage of all our opportunities. Whenever we die, even if we are very old, there are always more things we could have experienced, more activities we could have done, and more people we could have been. The human life-project, according to this account, aims at actualising as many of these possibilities as it can, and the harm of death is that it puts an end to that project. If we understand the meta-project human lives are supposed to be engaged with in this way, then we can see again how death might affect our lives’ meaningfulness. Arguably, when death interrupts this meta-project, it would render our whole life’s work futile. Thus, if our efforts being futile is incompatible with our lives being properly purposeful and therefore meaningful, then death could prevent our lives being meaningful.

This version of the interruption argument can be stated as follows:

1. The life work of human beings is entirely tied up in an overarching project.
2. Death necessarily interrupts this project, rendering the life’s work futile.
3. A life filled with futile efforts cannot be purposeful in the way required for meaningfulness.
4. Mortal human lives cannot be meaningful.

The immortalist faces a dilemma when pressed for further information about the structure of these meta-projects, however, and taking either horn renders the argument unsound. In the first case, let’s assume that the meta-projects just discussed – that of self-development or fully exercising all of one’s opportunities – had final goals. For the former, the final goal would have to be something like ‘becoming the perfect person’, while for the latter it would have to be something like ‘living a complete life’, i.e. a life with no stone unturned, no experience missed, and nothing left to do.

The problem now stands for this horn, that if these projects have an achievable end state, and if we worked hard enough at them, they could eventually in principle be completed. Yet, this would mean that premise 2 would be false; although most present-day human deaths would likely interrupt these projects, there is nothing which implies that death would *necessarily* be an interruption. If we could live long enough we could, in theory, reach these goals. Therefore, there would be a time after which death could not possibly be an interruption to them and could not possibly render our work futile. This may be small relief to us now, but it would show the immortalist is wrong to suggest we cannot be mortal and have meaningful lives; all we need would be mortal lives which are *long* enough to complete our overarching meta-projects.

Nevertheless, I think it is more plausible to take the second horn of the dilemma and understand these projects as *not* building to some achievable final goal. For starters, we can doubt whether becoming a perfect person or living a complete life are even conceivable aims, let alone practically feasible ones. For instance, one might argue that the ideal of becoming absolutely perfect is simply unachievable for human beings because our powers are limited and eventually we would hit our ceiling. Alternatively, one might think that there is no such thing as a perfect person, but that there are many different ways of developing oneself, none of which deserve to be singled out as the best. Finally, one might think that the project of self-development is in fact an endless one, as I suggested above, in which case there could be no final goal because it would always be possible to get better. Similarly, one might think it would be impossible to ‘complete’ life because there could always be more to do (even if this is just satisfying one’s repeatable desires).

Now, if these projects do not have final goals, but are still worth doing, then this seems to entail that the value or point of these projects must be found along the way; i.e. the fruit of this activity could not be entirely wrapped up in some final achievement, but rather that the ‘work’ in each case must be worth doing for its own sake.[[121]](#footnote-121) In other words, self-development is worth doing itself, or filling out one’s life is worth doing itself, regardless of where these projects lead. If this is the case, however, then death could *never* render our work futile because it was *self-justifying* and thus would have been worth doing no matter when or how it was stopped. For instance, if the project of becoming a better person was worth doing because self-development is its own reward, then it would be impossible to render this work futile through an interruption; although death could prevent us pursuing this project any further, it could not make our efforts so far totally wasted, because they would have already been worth doing as we were going along. As Sigrist analogises:

“If I am running only in order to win a marathon, then my hours of training will be wasted by a loss. But if I am running just for the satisfaction of running itself, I cannot fail to be successful so long as I am running at all” (Sigrist, 2015, p.86-7).

And the exact same is likely to be true with the projects of self-development or leading a full human life; these projects could be interrupted in the sense that death could stop us working on them more, but death could not make the efforts futile because they were already worth doing for their own sake; developing a new skill or experiencing some new pleasure both seem to hold some inherent value, regardless of whether the larger projects they fit into get interrupted eventually.

Crucially, the dilemma presented above applies equally to any conceivable meta-project one can think of for human lives. If this hypothetical project has a point, either its point will be entirely wrapped up in some final achievement, in which case death would not necessarily render our work futile provided we lived long enough to secure this achievement, or its point will simply be the work itself, in which case death could not render our work futile because it would already have been achieving its point, perpetually, as we made progress.[[122]](#footnote-122)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this meta-project interruption argument ignores all the other kinds of value which stem from our activities, and wrongly assumes that anything we do only has a point in as much as it contributes to some meta-project. This is clearly implausible though; for example, there may be some value in saving a child’s life if it allows one to progress further along the path of self-development or life-completion, but there is clearly some point to it besides how it relates to those projects. Thus, even if death made our efforts futile *with regard* to these overarching projects, it could not make them *entirely* futile, granting that they serve other purposes as well, and they patently do. In short, the sub-projects that may or may not be subsumed under a larger meta-project often have their own goals and successes, and these are themselves enough to vindicate our efforts and render them non-futile, regardless of whether death actually or necessarily prevents us from completing some alleged meta-project in the end.

In summary, this interruption argument only has a chance of succeeding if we ignore the many valuable goals we aim for and secure within life, and assume that all our efforts are completely pointless *except* to the extent they contribute to our achieving the final goal of some overarching meta-project. I’ve argued that this is an implausible way to interpret our lives and efforts. Nevertheless, even if we were to see things this way, it would still not support the immortalists’ claim that we cannot live meaningful lives as mortals because death renders our work futile; all we would need is a *long enough* mortal life to complete these overarching projects and we could avoid the futility threatened by death entirely.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Overall, we can now conclude that death does not appear to pose a catastrophic danger to the meaningfulness of our lives through affecting their purposefulness. Death neither demotivates us in general, nor renders everything we do futile, nor does our mortality necessitate that all our activity is aimed at mere self-perpetuation; rather, mortals routinely pursue and achieve worthwhile goals within their finite lives, and that is the essence of purposefulness. It is true that our deaths can *damage* the meaningfulness of our lives when they interrupt us in the middle of our projects, and thereby potentially render our prior work futile to some extent. Yet, so long as those interrupted projects can be finished by others or have generated some value already, or we have *other* projects which we have completed beforehand, then there will still be plenty of non-futile and purposeful activity left in our lives. Hence our lives can still be meaningful to that extent.

7. Mortality and significance

“all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system… the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins...”

(Russell, 1957, p. 107)

In the previous chapter I considered arguments in favour of the claim that death undermines the meaningfulness of our lives, either by making our efforts pointless or futile. However, I have concluded that, while death does seem capable of affecting our lives negatively in some ways – such as interrupting *some* of our projects before we can complete them – we saw no good reason to think the efforts of mortal beings would be entirely characterised by pointlessness or futility. Hence, we have seen no good reason yet for thinking mortal lives would necessarily lack meaningfulness.

In this chapter, I will consider two further arguments which hold that death undermines the meaningfulness of our lives because it ensures we cannot be *significant.* In 7.1, I will consider the claim that mortality constrains our capacity to make a difference to the world so much that our lives are inevitably insignificant. In 7.2, I will consider the claim that death – or the death of our species – somehow negates or *destroys* the significance which our lives had built up prior to its arrival. Both of these claims hinge on particular perspectives or assumptions which one may choose to adopt. However, in each case, I argue that there is nothing necessitating that we adopt these perspectives; more optimistic ones are available, and they are at least equally legitimate, if not more appropriate for the present debate.

7.1 The impact argument

7.1.1 The insignificance of mortal lives sub specie aeternitatis

The first argument I will discuss is inspired by the bleak image of human life commonly found when we examine it from a particular standpoint often referred to in the literature as ‘sub specie aeternitatis’ (hereafter SSA), which roughly translates to ‘from the perspective of eternity’. Essentially, the thought is that, when we reflect on our current mortal lifespans from a viewpoint which also takes into consideration the entire duration of the universe, we are typically struck with the realisation that we only exist for an incredibly short amount of time, relatively speaking.[[123]](#footnote-123) As Avery Kolers puts it, “In the history of the universe, and even of the Earth, each of us isnot even a blip” (2015, p.1-2). Similarly, Raymond Tallis makes the following statement:

“Long lives are long measured only against the average: there are longer lives but no long ones. Compared with the eternity of non-existence, even a nonagenerian's death is close to being a stillbirth.” (Tallis, 2015, p.304)

Such thoughts can be troubling. However, importantly for my discussion, they have often been directly connected to the concept of meaningfulness. For instance, Chappell explains:

“We can get a sense of the meaninglessness of life by looking at the vastness of the universe and time and the shortness and littleness of us and our projects... In this bleak Spinozistic perspective, it can seem like there is nothing that we finite beings could do that could ward off the meaninglessness of our lives.” (Chappell, 2007, p.33)

Such passages are incredibly common.[[124]](#footnote-124) There appears to be some connection, therefore, between facts about our relative longevity in comparison to the universe, and our intuitive conceptions of meaningfulness. In fact, Kolers claims that describing life in the ways above is 'a shot across the bow' for many of our implicitly held theories of life's meaningfulness (2015, p.2). Nevertheless, despite the popularity of such thoughts, it is worth trying to explain the thought process behind them.

The general idea seems to be that only long-lived creatures, relative to the scale of the universe, can have meaningful lives. If this premise is true, that would explain the feelings described by Chappell and others. However, some see this claim as strange. Chappell himself, for instance, dismisses the worry as a 'non-sequitur', arguing that, “Just because we are small and the universe is big is, in itself, no reason to doubt that our lives can be meaningful or valuable” (2007, p.34). Likewise, Thomas Nagel writes: “suppose we lived forever; would not a life that is absurd if it lasts seventy years be infinitely absurd if it lasted through eternity?” (1971, p.717). Similarly, Metz (2013, p.133) and Baggini (2005, p.54) both assert that the bare fact of having a longer or even infinitely long life itself would not appear to secure its meaningfulness. After all, it is easy to imagine immortal lives, such as Sisyphus’, which appear meaningless despite being endless.

What is going on here? The sceptical thought is apparently that, if meaningfulness or meaninglessness is a property that attaches to our lives, simply scaling those lives up or down should not affect that property, it would just leave us with more or less of the same. Just as a red ball would be red no matter how big it was or how long it existed for, our meaningless lives could not be rendered meaningful simply by their existing for a longer period of time. While this sceptical thought is reasonable though, there is still clearly something to the immortalists’ worry as well. Reflecting on our lives from the cosmic SSA viewpoint described above *does* seem to undermine their meaningfulness. What appears to be the case is that there is disconnect between our longevity *itself* and the meaningfulness of our lives. Yet, despite this fact, our minuscule mortal lifespans, relative to the vast duration of the universe, do indicate to us that *something* is amiss with our meaningfulness.

Granting this, what is most plausible is perhaps that the duration of our lives, relative to the universe, is indeed relevant to the meaningfulness of our lives but only *indirectly* so. In other words, we might expect to find some other factor, more obviously connected to meaningfulness, which longevity plays some role in determining. Alternatively, perhaps our longevity, while not determining this factor, can give us clues about its presence in our lives, such that knowing we are incredibly short-lived is *evidence* for the fact that our lives lack this crucial factor of meaningfulness. I propose that the best candidate for this factor, as one may have guessed from the title of this chapter, is *significance*, specifically significance understood as primarily a measurement of the impact or magnitude of our achievements (which is how I have been employing the term since Chapter 2). In other words, our mortality causes us to be relatively short-lived and that ensures our lives are insignificant in the sense of making a relatively low level of impact on the universe which, in turn, is what may potentially threaten the meaningfulness of our lives. Indeed, the relevance of significance seems to chime with Robert Solomon’s description of the pessimistic SSA view of life:

“Compare puny man with the infinity of the universe. Or compare our brief lifetimes with the span of eternity. Or think of our meagre actions within the context of intergalactic collisions... The upshot of every such contrast is that we are virtually nothing, our actions and subjective feelings wholly insignificant.” (Solomon, 2006, p.39)

To reiterate, we have seen that, when considering our lives against the vast spatio-temporal background of the universe, a fairly common reaction is to see them as less meaningful than we previously did. Moreover, the fact that we die after such a relatively short time while the universe exists for aeons also indicated to some that our lives are ‘insignificant’. Now, provided we accept that meaningfulness requires significance, and we understand significance in the way I have suggested, we can now see how this is all connected: the concern most relevant to meaningfulness, when we examine our short mortal lives from the SSA, is specifically that we don’t seem to be able to make much of a *difference* relative to the vast dimensions of our universe. Seachris expresses the worry well:

“if one takes the model of impact as the primary metric for measuring the good life, then futility looms threateningly on the horizon, as nothing we do will make an impact in any sort of deep, lasting, or ultimate sense in the universe as posited by naturalism. Even seemingly great impacts, like finding a cure for cancer, end up not mattering from the unconcerned, temporally distant perspective of a universe in ruins.” (Seachris, 2011, p.151)

In other words, if we step back and look at the whole history of time from start to finish, it seems like nothing we would be able to accomplish, no matter how important, would have a big enough impact to render our lives significant overall (again, in the sense of producing great or valuable results). In other words, although our lives might be impactful enough to seem significant from our normal human standpoint, this judgement disappears when we step back into the SSA standpoint and see the full vastness of the universe and how little we affect it. Indeed, all the human beings throughout history have done little more than temporarily scratch the surface of a single planet among the trillions of trillions that will exist on for eternity. Therefore, if we believe that one’s life can only be meaningful if it is sufficiently significant in this way, it appears that our lives cannot escape meaninglessness.

Moreover, the blame for this meaninglessness can indeed be laid (at least partly) at the feet of our mortality, since it is because we are so *short-lived* (amongst other things), that our ability to produce significant impacts is so constrained. As Seachris explains, of all the facts which limit our power to make a difference, “the most limiting of them all [is] a naturalistic understanding of human mortality, one that views mortality as final” (2011, p.151). If we could live for eternity, on the other hand, this might allow us to take on bigger and more impactful projects, and thus render our lives significant overall. Granting this, our mortality can be seen as rendering us insignificant in the universe because it ensures our lives are over too fast to make any difference on a scale large enough to count. Thus, it could also be seen as ensuring our lives are meaningless. This impact argument can be formalised in the following way:

1. If a person’s life produces only a minuscule impact, it will be insignificant.
2. The SSA viewpoint reveals that the impact produced by any human life is minuscule.
3. All mortal human lives are insignificant.
4. If a life is insignificant it cannot be meaningful.
5. Mortal human lives cannot be meaningful.

For this impact argument, the essential claims are that meaningfulness requires significance, and our lives are not in fact significant in the grand scheme of things because the brevity of our lives (amongst other things) prevents us from making a sufficient degree of impact on the universe around us. As Iddo Landau expresses the problem:

“Perhaps if the effects of our actions were to last for millions of years, and if we were to affect many stars in all the distant galaxies, we would consider our lives to be meaningful. But upon recognizing that our effect is as limited as it is, we cannot but see our lives as meaningless.” (Landau, 2014, p.457-458)

To be clear though, the argument I am considering here does not claim that producing a high-impact is sufficient for someone’s life to be meaningful, only that it is necessary. Moreover, it does not deny that our actions have any impact; relative to a human scale, things like curing diseases and making celebrated works of art can indeed be impactful to *some* degree. Rather the argument simply notes that, considered in their grander context, this impact is simply not great or long-lasting enough to make our lives significant.

It is also worth pointing out straight away that, even granting the argument above, it would not follow that mortality is *necessarily* incompatible with meaningfulness. The present worry is that our lives are meaningless because we are incapable of doing anything of significance. Nevertheless, while our mortality does appear to be one of the biggest constraints on our capacity to do significant things, it does not render us entirely powerless. In fact, if a mortal being developed certain supernatural powers, for instance, it seems they could be able to perform actions on a universal scale. Hence, they would be capable of living a significant and meaningful life even if they ultimately died.

Acknowledging this, it seems we cannot say that *only* immortality could save us from insignificance and meaninglessness; instead, the removal of any constraint equivalent to our mortality (in terms of limiting our power to affect the universe) could increase our chances of being able to live a significant life too. In fact, just having a much longer mortal life would put us in a better position, since it is specifically the *shortness* of our lives that is causing the problem here, not merely the fact that they end at some point. This argument cannot be used to support a strong immortalist position then (i.e. one which holds that mortal life is necessarily meaningless because it is mortal). Nevertheless, could a weaker claim be true – that our mortality is one condition amongst others which are jointly sufficient to render our lives insignificant and therefore meaningless?[[125]](#footnote-125)

7.1.2 Responses to the impact argument

If the immortalists’ opponent wishes to reject the above argument, and hold that our lives can be meaningful even with our low level of impact and resultant insignificance, they must do one of two things: either they must reject that significance is required for meaningfulness (which I think would be a mistake), or they must assert that, even if significance is required for meaningfulness, our lives can still count as significant overall despite producing only low levels of impact. In other words, they could claim that there is indeed a threshold of impact one’s life must pass in order to be rendered significant and therefore meaningful, but this threshold need not be set as unachievably high as the pessimistic/immortalist passages above make out. I think this latter option is a far better strategy overall. However, there are a couple of different ways the immortalists’ opponents could try to justify their counter-claim here.

One option might simply be to reject that the SSA standpoint, which ranges over all of time and space, should necessarily be seen as the ‘correct’ standpoint for examining the impact of our lives. In other words, to reject the inference from premise 2 to 3. This tactic is chosen by several philosophers, including Nicolas Rescher (1990) and Simon Blackburn (2001), who opt instead to affirm that our normal human standpoint on our lives is in fact the perspective which we should be adopting to gather data for these kinds of evaluations. In other words, just because our life’s work appears to have only minuscule impacts when considered against the backdrop of the cosmos, that does not mean we must consider our lives to *actually* be insignificant. Rather, we can choose to side with how things appear from our more favourable everyday perspective, the one which routinely presents many human level actions as impactful and many normal human lives as significant.

To reject this claim, the immortalists would have to find a way of arguing that the SSA perspective on our lives is, in fact, privileged over our everyday perspective in seeing some truth of the matter. Nevertheless, how could the immortalists justify this claim? What reason do we have for thinking that how things appear from the SSA perspective provides authoritative information on the significance of our lives? One suggestion the immortalists could make is that, being pulled back as far as one can go, the SSA perspective succeeds in taking into consideration the *full* context of our lives. Thus, if we wish to examine how our lives *really* are, perhaps we should take up this perspective which shows them along with everything else in reality, without missing anything out.

Nevertheless, the maximal distance the SSA perspective stands from our everyday lives could also be seen as undermining its accuracy. For instance, Joe Mintoff considers the possibility that, when we try to adopt the SSA view, we might not actually be getting closer to the truth, because this 'wider point of view' might be so wide that it causes us to miss out on “the valuable details” of life (2008, p.65). Similarly, Wai-Hung Wong worries that, when we try to step back into the SSA standpoint we may also be detaching ourselves so far from life that we can no longer perceive the features of reality which normally demonstrate to us that our actions matter (2008, p.146). A potential argument here could thus be that the SSA perspective fails to recognise our lives as being significant, not because it correctly *perceives* that their impacts are small, but simply because it is too far removed to accurately judge them at all. On the other hand, our closer human standpoint can see all the important details of our lives, and hence makes the ‘correct’ judgement that we do sometimes make big impacts and thus our lives can indeed be significant.

Essentially, our inability to perceive the lives of human beings as significant from the SSA standpoint may not be a reflection of the truth, but merely a result of the deficiencies of this standpoint, or our own cognitive limitations when taking up this standpoint. Plausibly, we can only conceive of so many things at once. Moreover, we find it difficult to imagine objects or events that occur on vastly larger or smaller distances or timescales than we are used to. Granting these observations, if we scale our viewpoint up to take in the whole of the universe and everything in it for all of time, the limitations on our cognitive capacities would make it difficult or impossible for us conceive of things on a normal human scale, let alone perceive their impact or significance. If this story is correct, however, the fact our lives don’t seem significant when considered from the SSA should not concern us, because we can write-off this perception as resulting from a mere cognitive limitation, rather than as a discovery of some bleak matter of fact. It is not that our actions are not important and impactful, it is simply that a cosmic observer would be too distant and detached to properly grasp what their impact *really was*.

I think this response to the impact argument is fairly tenable. However, Landau (2011) takes a different route to Rescher and Blackburn, and argues that it is in fact possible for us to perceive the detail of our lives and judge them to be significant, *even when* examining them from the SSA standpoint. True, he acknowledges, “it is visually or optically difficult to notice a small item in an immense or infinite background; but that does not mean that we cannot conceive of, or evaluate, the worth of such an item while acknowledging its place in a larger, and even infinite, context” (p.730). Landau’s basic point here, is apparently that we can imagine someone ‘zooming in’ to evaluate our lives from a vastly distant standpoint, but holding a very low threshold for what counted as impactful 'enough' to be significant, such that they could grant significance even to our relatively small-scale mortal lives. For instance, Landau notes that most religious people typically imagine this of God: “Seeing an action in a large context and acknowledging that it has only a very limited effect, then, does not mean that God will not consider the act to be of worth; a cosmic perspective does not entail cosmic thresholds of meaningfulness” (2011, p.730).

Landau’s claim is not just that God could care about our lives, however, but that *anyone* has the capacity to observe our lives from the SSA standpoint and yet still judge some of them to be significant. To establish this, Landau draws a distinction between *standpoints* and *standards*. Standards, for Landau, are the criteria or thresholds we accept for a life to be considered meaningful, while standpoints are the particular perspectives or viewpoints from which we can examine our lives to see if they fulfil these criteria, such as the SSA perspective we have been referring to so far. The impact argument above can thus be understood as claiming that the standards for meaningfulness or significance we should adopt are those which we normally seem to hold when adopting the SSA standpoint. Yet, when we examine our lives from the SSA standpoint, this will typically lead us to set our standards for what counts as impactful ‘enough’ for significance and meaningfulness at *cosmically* high levels, since we have scaled up our standpoint to take the whole cosmos into account, and these cosmically high standards will be impossible for us mortals to satisfy.

Nevertheless, Landau’s argument is that we needn’t hold such cosmically high standards *even if* we choose to examine our lives from the cosmic or Sub Specie Aeternitatis standpoint. The crucial claim in Landau’s response is that our standards for meaningfulness or significance can be held *independently* of our standpoints of evaluation. According to Landau, it would be perfectly legitimate to hold very demanding standards when examining our lives from normal human standpoints, but it would be equally legitimate to hold onto very easy-going standards even as we step back to look at our lives from the SSA perspective. In his own words:

“what determines assessments of the meaning of a life are the standards of meaningfulness one endorses rather than the size of the context in which that life is assessed. Employing non-demanding standards of meaningfulness to assess a life is compatible with examining it in the context of the cosmos at large.” (Landau, 2011, p.727)

The upshot of this observation is that, although it may be natural to scale-up our thresholds for what counts as impactful ‘enough’ for significance as we scale-up our standpoints of evaluation, this is not necessary or mandatory (p.731). Rather, we are permitted to retain a threshold or standard of significance which is similar to the one we seem to hold in our everyday lives, even when we step backwards into the SSA standpoint. In other words, while Rescher and Blackburn argue that we should not examine our lives from the SSA standpoint, but rather a closer more forgiving one, Landau is arguing that *even if* we adopt the SSA standpoint, there is nothing about that which means we cannot hold human-scale standards of evaluation. As he puts it: “the size of the framework in which a certain issue is evaluated is largely independent of the standards of evaluation. When the former grows the latter may, but need not, become more demanding” (p.730).

Thus, even someone considering our lives in the context of all of time and space could still affirm their significance, because their *threshold* for what counted as impactful enough could be kept at a relatively low human-scale level. For example, Landau notes that:

“many parents who, owing to the fruits of their parenting, see their children flourishing consider their lives meaningful even if they fully recognize that their efforts did not affect the cosmos at large” (Landau, 2011, p729).[[126]](#footnote-126)

To summarise this, contrary to the immortalists’ impact argument given above, Landau maintains that “it is possible to inspect one’s life in the context of the whole cosmos while using standards of meaningfulness that do not have to do with an effect on the whole cosmos” (p.729). Therefore, putting this back into terms of impact, despite only making impact on a human-sized scale, the conclusion that our lives are insignificant when observed from the SSA standpoint is not inevitable. The impact threshold for significance which we hold there can be the same one we hold in our everyday lives: one which counts much of what we actually do as significant and can therefore cast our lives as meaningful.

Landau does not actively argue for any particular standard or threshold for meaningfulness himself, however; instead he is satisfied simply to say that there are many plausible options, and some of these allow our current mortal lives to succeed. There are standards which hold that human-sized lives cannot be significant or meaningful, he admits, but these are not “necessitated by the cosmic perspective” (p.731). In fact, even if it is the case, as it appears to be, that these higher standards come *naturally* to us as we step back into the SSA standpoint, Landau seems to be correct that, at least in theory, “A cosmic perspective may endorse non-cosmic, but rather much more moderate, standards of meaningfulness, and consider many people to have successfully passed this threshold” (p.729).

Landau is therefore content to have established merely the *possibility* that our lives needn’t be seen as insignificant, even from cosmically distant viewpoints. However, for some, that may not be enough to assuage our worries; we need to know not just that there exist certain standards by which our lives could conceivably be judged significant, but that these standards which make this judgement are *correct*. Ideally, what we would want to discover is some *objectively true* threshold for significance, such that we could say without a doubt that this is the standard which should be employed, regardless of our standpoint, and thus we could determine the truth, once and for all, about the significanceof our lives.

Unfortunately, however, there does not appear to be any method for determining what an objectively 'true' threshold for significance would be. It is true that measures of impact do appear to be relatively objective and quantifiable things, such that we could provide relatively consistent rankings of which events or actions or lives had greater impacts than others (if we carried out enough research, perhaps). Yet, our judgements of what is impactful ‘enough’ to count as significant do not seem to share the same objectivity. Rather, our judgements about what is impactful ‘enough’ to be significant seem to vary according to the implicit *context* of our judgements which naturally provide, in Landau’s terms, certain standards of evaluation. For instance, a group of people might agree that a glass of spilt red wine was significant if it ruined one’s dinner party, and here one’s context and hence standards for evaluation will be set at a relatively low dinner-party-centric level. Alternatively, we might agree that the assassination of JFK was significant, and here we would presumably be speaking relative to the context of something like USA history in the 20th Century and employing the thresholds for significance which naturally accompany that context.

Nevertheless, keeping the impact of these events fixed, they could both easily be recast as *insignificant* simply by increasing the scale of the context or standpoint we examine them from, and thereby raising our implicitly accepted thresholds for what counts as impactful enough for significance. For example, both the spilt wine and the assassination may be presented as insignificant overall, if considered as events within the entire history of Earth so far. In the end, there appears to be no *absolute* truth to the matter of whether an event is impactful enough to count as significant. All we can say is whether certain events will count as significant relative to certain thresholds or standards of significance, or perhaps within certain contexts or from certain standpoints, since these tend to naturally suggest their own standards of evaluation. Thus, a person’s life may seem impactful enough to count as significant when examined from their own perspective, but insignificant when examined from the SSA standpoint, or with a cosmically high threshold for significance, and that is really all that can be said on the matter.

Given this, there can be no conclusive answer to the question of whether or not our mortal lives can produce enough impact to count as significant overall; we can only determine whether they are significant with regard to certain standards or frameworks. Similarly, since I have argued that significance is a requirement for meaningfulness, it will transpire that whether or not someone’s life counts as meaningful overall is *also* dependent, at least partly, on the standpoint one examines it from or, more specifically, the standards one uses.

However, there are at least two things one can say to the immortalist in response to their impact argument. The first is that they have no good justification for claiming that the *correct* standards for judging something’s significance are those cosmically difficult ones which we naturally seem to take up when adopting the SSA standpoint. Thus, the immortalists have no recourse to claim that our lives *actually are* insignificant and hence meaningless in any *absolute* sense. Hepburn writes, “if we judge that a particular view does have authority, this is to make a judgment of value and not simply to describe one's imaginings” (1966, p.135). In other words, if an immortalist claims that the way things naturally appear to us from the SSA is how we *should* see things, and thus that unachievably high standards for significance *should* be employed when evaluating our lives, this will not be to describe reality in any way, but merely to convey their own as yet unjustified opinion.

Furthermore, the second reply one can make to the immortalists is that our lives do appear to have the potential for significance at least according to standards of significance which are *normal*. In other words, using the everyday perspective and standards we typically adopt when examining the significance and meaningfulness of our lives – e.g. when someone says ‘I wish my job was more significant/meaningful’, or ‘Gandhi lived a significant/meaningful life’, or ‘I’m finding my hobby a bit insignificant/meaningless lately’ – our lives can and will often be judged to be both significant and meaningful. Thus, if what we are interested in here is discovering whether mortal life must be insignificant or meaningless according to the conceptions that we actually employ in the course of our concrete human interactions, the answer appears to be a reassuring ‘no’.

While immortal lives look likely to produce more impact than mortal lives, according to the relevant standards and thresholds that seem to matter to us most in our actual lives, it appears that both sorts of life could produce enough impact to satisfy these standards – and the immortalist has no obvious way to argue that these standards are wrong. To conclude, it seems that the impact argument is not compelling since it necessitates that one adopts cosmically challenging thresholds for significance but the immortalist has provided no justification for doing so, and neither, we might think, can any justification be forthcoming. Even granting that our lives produce little impact relative to the universe, we needn’t think they cannot produce enough impact to be reasonably considered significant and meaningful, at least in ordinary contexts.

7.2 The permanence argument

7.2.1 The staying-power intuition

In the previous sections I considered and rejected the argument that mortal human life must be seen as insignificant, and therefore meaningless, because we cannot make a big enough impact. However, I neglected to say much about what *kind* of an impact was actually relevant to this argument. Many times I described our impact as being ‘on the universe’ or something similar, but does that mean that *any* kind of impact could make our lives significant? As Brooke Alan Trisel wonders “Many of us seek to make a lasting contribution, but a contribution to what, we should ask” (2016, p.13). Would it really make us feel any better to know that somehow, as a result of our lives, a distant planet had moved from one solar system to another, or that a far-off star had changed colour? These would be significant impacts on the universe, one might think, but perhaps not in the way required to make our lives meaningful, or meaningful in the way we want them to be.

The kind of impact I think is most relevant here is specifically the impact we can have on other people, for instance, by fighting injustices or creating admired works of art. Indeed, Trisel concludes something like this, observing: “the majority of us pursue our work to better our own lives and the lives of other human beings” (p.13). Dan Weijers also stipulates this in his arguments, arguing that what we need for a meaningful life is not just to produce certain consequences, but certain consequences for *life* (2014, p.9). Moreover, I think this chimes with what I said in Chapter 2: that the kind of significance we want for our lives may be understood as a significance which comes from producing only *valuable* impacts. In short, providing we accept the further assumption that consequences which never have anything to do with living beings could not really hold much value, it follows that producing valuable impacts would require us to produce impacts *for humanity*.[[127]](#footnote-127) Some might disagree with this assumption, but I will grant it for the purposes of the following debate. To be clear, for the remainder of this section I will be presuming that the kind of significant and meaningful life we want can only be obtained if one’s life results in beneficial or valuable consequences for other people – though I will typically refer to these concepts as ‘significance’ and ‘meaningfulness’ for ease.

This admission does not affect the conclusions of the previous section, however. Even acknowledging that we must make valuable impacts in particular to have the kind of significance and meaningfulness we want, we still needn’t see the consequences of mortal lives as being too small-scale to count. Nevertheless, there is another distinct but related immortalist worry that remains here: not that our valuable consequences aren’t grand enough, but simply that they will not *last*. Consider the following worry expressed by Irving Singer:

“Not only will I die and be expunged but so too will the earth, the solar system, and possibly everything else that exists in the universe; whatever anyone achieves can have only local importance and short-lived value; in itself nothing is permanently or objectively good or bad; and therefore everything adds up to nothing and nothing really matters.” (Singer, 1992, p.80)

Trisel also voices a worry on the same lines:

“[Humans] want to be able to look back at life, from the distant vantage point they are viewing life from, and to say that it amounted to something. Life did not simply perpetuate itself for a while and then crumble to dust leaving no traces that it had ever existed.” (Trisel, 2002, p.74)

Moreover, looking at the other side of the issue, Richard Taylor has suggested that Sisyphus’ rock-rolling work could avoid meaninglessness if perhaps his rocks remained at the top of the hill and were stacked into “a beautiful and *enduring* temple” (1970, p.21, my emphasis).

What is revealed in these passages is the intuition that our lives’ work can only be valuable or significant in a certain way if it endures forever. This thesis, or something like it, has been acknowledged by many theorists. For instance, psychologist Ernest Becker wrote:

“Man wants to know that his life has somehow counted, if not for himself, then at least in a larger scheme of things, that it has left a trace, a trace that has meaning. And in order for anything once alive to have meaning, its effects must remain alive in eternity in some way” (Becker, 1975, p.4).

Similarly, Joe Mintoff observes that “Some claim that a life is meaningful only if it makes a difference in the end” (2008, p.66), and Seachris labels such a belief the ‘staying-power intuition’, defined roughly as the thought that: “worthwhile, significant, and meaningful things *last*” (2011, p.142).

Furthermore, something like this staying-power intuition (SPI hereafter) is accepted by most people to at least *some* degree, I believe. When evaluating everyday actions and achievements, for instance, we do seem to pay attention to the duration of their effects or consequences. As one example, Skott Brill points out we would see little value in cleaning the windows of a building that was about to be demolished, since the effects of this action would be destroyed almost immediately (2007, p.11). Similarly, Oswald Hanfling writes that an assembly line worker doing repetitive work may be buoyed-up by the thought that he was making something valuable, but that “It would make a big difference if he knew that, further along the line, there is someone who regularly dismantles what he has done” (1987, p.23).

It seems we need the effects of our actions to last at least some minimum amount of time to think them worth doing. Moreover, it also seems that the longer they last, the more valuable or significant we see them as being. Brill here gives the example of the Iliad being seen as a relatively valuable piece of work often seemingly *because* it is still being read and still influencing our art and culture. In conclusion, Brill argues, “it is not obvious that the question concerning the lasting impact of our actions is irrelevant to the question concerning their importance” (2007, p.12). Hanfling also agrees with this conclusion, noting that to see our activities as meaningful they must have a ‘certain permanence’. Nevertheless, he asks, “what degree of permanence is needed?” (1987, p.24).

From our everyday standpoints, it seems as though our achievements don’t have to be *eternally* permanent to be worth working towards, so long as they last an acceptable amount of time. Yet, the version of the SPI indicated in the pessimistic passages from Singer, Trisel, and Becker above seems to imply that *eternal* permanence is indeed required. In other words, it would not be enough for the consequences of our actions to simply last a long time (even an *incredibly* long time) because, according to the concerns above, their value seems to be entirely drained if there *ever* comes a time when these consequences disappear ‘without a trace’ from the universe. Thus, what such passages appear to suggest is that only achievements or effects which last for *eternity* could possibly be enough here, and without such effects, our lives might be seen as ultimately insignificant and meaningless.

Indeed, this is explicitly what Weijers proposes, asserting that we could only be *sure* our lives were meaningful if we were sure our actions had ‘infinite consequences’, since “No matter how far we step back... infinite consequences do not vanish into meaninglessness” (2014, p.8). Even understanding the SPI to require that our actions produce literally everlasting consequences or traces to matter, though, does this actually pose a problem for us? Some think not; for instance, Geoffrey Scarre has claimed that human beings are capable of creating things which have “a permanent and transformative effect on what has come after them” (2007, p.42), and gives several examples of such pieces of work, including the Parthenon, Homer's Iliad, and Shakespeare's Hamlet. Moreover, he argues that almost all our actions, even seemingly small ones, can produce knock-on effects that stretch off into the future and are unlikely to ever disappear. Thus, he concludes that:

“apart from very trivial things, there is little that we do that ever becomes “purely past”. What is true of particular projects is true also of life as a whole. All of us influence the future in multiple ways. And this is perhaps a comforting thought, making death seem less final and destructive” (Scarre, 2007, p.43).

Nevertheless, even accepting Scarre’s point that our actions can produce ripples amongst our friends, family, and acquaintances which spread out in a *seemingly* unstoppable pattern, if we look long enough into the future, his claim that hardly anything will become ‘purely past’ seems wrong. In fact, we might even think the opposite is true: that *everything* we do will become 'purely past' given a long enough time-scale.

The easiest way to demonstrate this is to imaginatively jump forward a million years and consider the fact that it seems incredibly likely that our species will have died out. Indeed, even if we manage to escape Earth before it is rendered inhospitable through human actions or, much further down the line, eventually engulfed by the sun, there are a host of other things waiting out in the universe to kill us off. This is clear if we reflect on the fact that human beings can only survive in very specific conditions on certain parts of this planet, and the rest of the universe is even more unwelcoming. Moreover, on the miraculous possibility that we, as a species, have managed to survive a million years, what are our chances after another million, or a billion after that? With an infinite amount time and change, the probability that humanity would have been wiped out is 1. As James Lenman notes:

“one day, certainly, there will be no human beings. Perhaps that is a bad thing but, if so, it is a bad thing we had better learn to live with. The Second Law of Thermodynamics will get us in the end in the fantastically unlikely event that nothing else does first” (Lenman, 2002, p.254).

To be clear, it seems that humanity as a whole is destined to perish, sooner or later. Connecting this fact to the two other premises discussed so far – that meaningfulness (at least of the kind we want) requires us to produce impacts which are both greatly valuable to humanity and *eternally* so – we can now see clearly what the problem is: these criteria will be impossible to fulfil. Since the existence of our species in the universe can only last for a finite amount of time, we will be incapable of producing any impact which is *endlessly* beneficial to life. Thus, it seems like our lives are destined to be meaningless, at least in our current circumstances. The argument can be put in the following way:

1. For a life to be meaningful it needs to be rendered significant by producing eternally valuable consequences for humanity.
2. Humanity, as a species, will eventually die out.
3. It is impossible to produce eternally valuable consequences for humanity.
4. It is impossible for our lives to be meaningful.[[128]](#footnote-128)

We can now see precisely how our mortality is supposed to fit into this argument. Essentially, it is mortality’s fault, the immortalist might argue, that premise 2 is true. If it weren’t that we human beings were mortal, we would be able to live forever. Thus, there would at least be the possibility of producing achievements or impacts which benefited human beings for all time to come, even if this would be challenging. Nevertheless, mortal as we are, both on an individual and species level, this hope is impossible, and hence our chances of having meaningful lives are squashed.

William Lane Craig (1994) uses something like this argument in support of his claim that our lives could only be meaningful if God existed and provided us with an eternal afterlife. If this were true, humanity would exist permanently and so, potentially, would our lives’ work. Nevertheless, Craig argues, if the atheists are correct and death is final, the picture is bleak:

“Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, it makes no ultimate difference whether it ever did exist. Mankind is thus no more significant than a swarm of mosquitos or a barnyard of pigs, for their end is all the same… The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing.” (Craig, 1994, p.43)

Similarly, Seachris writes:

“Why is death in an exclusively naturalistic world thought by many to be a challenge to a meaningful life? One reason may be the widespread view that, ceteris paribus, meaningful things last, as in ‘’diamonds are forever’’… [However] From the perspective of a universe that will very likely become unfavorable to the existence of intelligent life, nothing we do seems of any real consequence or value. Death, both our own and the universe’s (speaking metaphorically of course), is a profound barrier to the meaningful properties and activities that populate human existence” (Seachris, 2017).

7.2.2 Responses to the permanence argument

To reiterate the immortalist argument on the table, the charge is that our lives cannot be meaningful in the way we want because this would require us to produce consequences which were *endlessly* valuable for human beings or human civilisation. Yet, in a world in which human beings are mortal, it seems as though our species could not last for an infinite amount of time, and thus such a requirement would be impossible to satisfy. This permanence argument hinges on our acceptance of what I’ve been calling the staying-power intuition (SPI) – the premise that nothing we do has any value or significance unless its consequences are permanent in some way. In other words, even if one’s life seemed significant for producing valuable effects at one moment in time, if there came a future point in time where all these effects had disappeared without a trace, this would reveal that one’s life was never actually significant in the first place.

As evidenced in the numerous illustrative quotes in the section above, many theorists (and lay-people) seem to hold something like the SPI, or at least be somewhat moved by it. Nevertheless, we haven’t seen much reason yet why it should be granted. It is true that the duration of the effects of an action is sometimes relevant to how significant or valuable we think it is, but why think that *eternal* permanence is such an absolute requirement?

One answer is suggested by Seachris: we care about leaving eternal traces because it is important to us how things turn out *in the end* (2011, p.152). As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Seachris believes we assign a “normative significance” to the conclusions of stories, and hence to the conclusions of our life-stories or the story of humanity (p.152). Taking a step back and observing the whole of existence as one long narrative, it seems nothing we do matters in the end, since the universe’s conclusion is always the same: cold and empty, with all traces of our lives annihilated. Imagine if every novel you ever read ended with the phrase 'and eventually they all died, and the universe became a desolate wasteland'; putting the trials and tribulations of the protagonist into contrast with the nothingness of that future reality would certainly evoke a sense that their actions were insignificant. I think Seachris is correct here; however, his theory hasn't so much explained or justified the SPI as simply recast it in different language. We want our lives to make a permanent difference because it matters to us how things turn out 'in the end', and vice versa, but we still don't have a reason as to *why* this matters to us so much or whether it *should*.

Indeed, one might argue that the SPI has got things the wrong way around; perhaps the effects of certain actions are not significant because they last a long time but, rather, things which last a long time tend to do so because they are significant. As Nozick wonders, it might make more sense to see long-lasting traces as *symptoms* of significant actions or meaningful lives, rather than *requirements* for either (2001, p.584). For instance, with regard to the Iliad, we might argue that it was not a valuable achievement *because* we are still reading it, but we are still reading it *because* it was a valuable achievement. This makes sense when we observe that things of worth often last because they are well made (in the case of buildings or monuments, for instance), or because, sensitive to their value, we deliberatelypreserve them(Trisel, 2004, p.387).

Furthermore, Trisel usefully points out that “Just because something may last a long time does not necessarily indicate that it is important” (p.387). For example, I could create a terrible work of art and leave it secure in a safe somewhere for thousands of years, but this longevity wouldn't add anything to the significance or value of the piece. Similarly, as I’ve already mentioned, a person might be immortal but if they do nothing but passively watch television, their life would not necessarily have been made any more significant or meaningful just because they were around for eternity.

So long-lastingness or even permanence certainly does not guarantee our achievements are valuable. An adherent of the SPI might accept this point, however, as it does not harm the permanence argument itself, since all they are trying to claim at heart is that *without* eternal staying-power, an achievement *can't* ultimately be valuable. Nevertheless, this claim can be seen as equally dubitable. For example, consider Michelangelo's David, a work of art which has been admired for centuries. Why should the fact that it will eventually crumble into dust destroy *all* of the value and significance of Michelangelo's achievement? The work might have gained more value – and hence rendered Michelangelo’s life more significant – if had lasted even longer, but given it has already been appreciated by so many and influenced so much else, surely it would still retain some value even if it was destroyed tomorrow?

Similarly, Trisel poses the question: if humanity were doomed to die in two weeks, would it therefore be pointless to save a little girl from drowning? (2004, p.384). Given those two weeks might be very valuable to her and her family, holding precious moments and pleasures, it seems not, and yet this is what the SPI appears to be claiming. Alternatively, Klemke (2008) describes a dentist who cures a man’s painful toothache, and a lawyer who proves innocent another falsely accused man. If either the dentist or the lawyer truly believed the SPI, they would presumably give up their practices, since both their clients would end up dead in the long run, and their work would have disappeared from sight. Nevertheless, as Klemke points out, we would think this attitude strange and ignorant of the true value and significance of these achievements (p.122). Peter Singer, too, gives another similar illustration of this point:

“Suppose that we become involved in a project to help a small community in a developing country to become free of debt and self-sufficient in food. The project is an outstanding success, and the villagers are healthier, happier, better educated, and economically secure and have fewer children. Now someone might say “what good have you done? In a thousand years these people will all be dead, and their children and grandchildren as well, and nothing that you have done will make any difference... [But] We should not, however, think of our efforts as wasted unless they endure forever, or even for a very long time.” (Singer, 1993, p.274)

Singer’s claim seems at least as intuitive as the SPI, if not more so; if we can help people, if we can relieve pain and create pleasure through our actions or inventions or our creative work, why should it matter that these feelings or the people who have them, won't last forever? It seems like, if there is value to be had, at least some of it is created and secured in these moments, and although our efforts cannot go on creating *more* value for all eternity, this shouldn't negate the value they had already generated. Aaron Smuts sums things up nicely here:

“Certainly there is value in making someone laugh, even if they do not laugh forever. Surely there is value in providing a hot meal for the hungry, even if they are not satiated for all eternity. And surely it is good to cure cancer, even if humanity does not endure until the end of time. These claims are far more secure than any premise in the final outcome argument. Something need not be permanent in order to be valuable while it exists.” (Smuts, 2013, p.546)[[129]](#footnote-129)

The problem as it stands is that *all* of our achievements are only temporary, and if we think that they will culminate in something eternally permanent, as Taylor puts it, “then we simply have not considered the thing closely enough” (1970, p.24). Yet, two opposing intuitions are in conflict here over whether these inevitably temporary consequences can hold any real value or confer any real significance on the lives of those who brought them about. The intuition of Smuts and Singer, amongst others, is that they can do, yet the SPI, which also seems plausible to many, says they cannot.

Is there any way to settle this dispute? Absent any reason to think either one of these intuitions is correct over the other, I see no reason we cannot simply choose to hold the one which is more favourable to human life, just as it would be legitimate to choose forgiving standards or thresholds of impact, as I concluded in 7.1.2. Nevertheless, we would have a reason to reject one of these conflicting intuitions if it could be demonstrated how it resulted from a faulty assumption and, fortunately for us, I believe such an explanation is possible in the case of the SPI. Moreover, I think this explanation also serves to disarm another closely related immortalist argument, which I will briefly outline first.

This new argument is essentially a twist on the permanence argument above but focuses on our lives themselves rather than the traces of our actions. In short, if we see the *bearer* of the property of significance or meaningfulness in this discussion as a person’s life – or even the person themselves, as Fumitake Yoshizawa (2015) suggests – it is possible to see our death as causing a serious problem, in that it eliminates the bearer of these properties and hence eliminates the instances of the properties themselves. To make an analogy, if we want to have a red ball, there are two ways this desire could be thwarted: either we could have a ball that isn’t red, or we could have no ball at all. Equally, it seems that we could lack a meaningful life either by having a life that is meaningless, or simply by not having a life at all (Yoshizawa, 2015, p.143). The immortalist worry should now be clear: death is not compatible with our lives being meaningful because, sooner or later, it destroys our lives themselves and hence destroys their meaningfulness too.

Both this argument and the traditional permanence one appear to be fuelled by the SPI: the intuition that things which disappear from the universe cease to count or exist in any way. Nevertheless, as I’ve mentioned, I think the SPI is based on a faulty assumption. Specifically, taking inspiration from Yoshizawa (2015, p.147, footnote 20), I believe that the SPI stems from a particular metaphysical understanding of *time*. Furthermore, I believe the SPI-advocate’s understanding of time, is *less* plausible than an alternative which directly supports the more favourable everyday intuitions of Smuts and Singer etc. Before I begin, though, it is worth reminding ourselves of the way that SPI-related concerns about our lives are voiced. For instance, Chappell suggests that trying to do something meaningful with our lives can be seen as analogous to trying to “write some memorable poem on the blackboard of the world” (2007, p.32). However:

“[One] way in which mortality threatens us with meaninglessness is that it threatens to make a mock of anything we do achieve... To sustain the last paragraph’s metaphor, it is that even if we do complete a good poem or two on the blackboard of the world before we die, still it will be wiped out not long after death wipes us out—leaving nothing” (Chappell, 2007, p.32).

Here, the worry sincerely seems to be that if the traces of our achievements disappear at any point in the future, it would leave *nothing whatsoever* behind; it would be as if we had never achieved anything, or even existed, in the first place. However, this perception seems to be predicated on the notion that, at some time years from now, anything which does not exist or affect anything that exists in that moment may as well have *never* existed. In other words, those who voice the SPI worries seem to be holding a certain kind of *presentist* metaphysical view of time, wherein only the things which exist in the present moment exist at all, and anything which has moved purely into the past is now no longer real in any sense of the word.

In general, someone holding a presentist view of time would hold that only the present is real and that the past and future are unreal. In other words, the things which exist in the current moment are the only things that truly exist, and both ‘past’ and ‘future’ things are non-existent. To put it another way, if a presentist were to make a list of all real objects in the universe, they would only list the things which appear *right now* (Markosian, 2016). For instance, such a list would include the Eiffel Tower and the Taj Mahal, but not the Twin Towers, since they are no longer around. Objects to the ‘future’ of our present are those which will come to be, and ‘past’ objects are those which used to be, but necessarily neither kind of object *actually* exists.

Temporarily granting presentism, we can see how the SPI could make sense, since only achievements which leave *permanent* traces are spared the fate of completely vanishing from reality. Everything which ceases to make a difference to the universe, on this presentist view, ceases to have any value or significance, because nothing can count except what *perpetually* effects the present moment. From this kind of presentist view, if a person and all traces of their life disappeared, it would leave the universe in a state identical to the state it would be in if they had never existed at all. Since neither they nor the traces of their actions would appear in the present moment, they would have simply vanished from reality*.* Such an eventuality, I think, would be a cause for concern, and would perhaps indicate that their life was futile and insignificant. If the universe would end up *exactly* the same regardless of whether you were born or not, it would be hard to maintain the belief that your life held any significance whatsoever.

Thus, presentism also supports the permanence argument: mortal as our species is, there will come a time when the present moment of the universe no longer contains us. Therefore, it will be as if we never existed at all, and the significance of *everything* we had done would be annihilated from reality. Moreover, it would also support the twist on the permanence argument outlined above: if significance or meaningfulness are properties of our lives, then it seems we will no longer have had a meaningful life at the moment we die, because our life will itself have been deleted from reality.

Nevertheless, the presentist view is not the only metaphysical view of time one might adopt. We might alternatively take a four-dimensional or eternalist view of time, which holds that time is merely another dimension alongside the three spatial dimensions. According to four-dimensionalism, objects and events in our past and future are just as real as things in the present, they are just ‘located’ at different times, as we can be located at different points in space. Thus, both Socrates and my great great grandchildren exist to the same extent that I do, we merely appear at different points in time. Moreover, when I die, I will not be eliminated from reality, as the presentists would suggest; rather, I will be real eternally but only existent in those years during which I was alive.

Granting four-dimensionalism, the achievements of people who died thousands of years ago (and the people themselves) are as real and exist to the same degree, as achievements which are happening now but on the other side of the globe. For a four-dimensionalist, even in a quadrillion years when the universe is cold and dead, and the work of humanity has disappeared without a trace, it still matters what happened because those past events and achievements are still real; though they may no longer be making a difference, they have not been deleted from reality and so their value and significance has not been negated. Billions of years from now the events of WWII will still be real, even if its effects no longer exist in that moment in time, and thus the achievements of the Allied soldiers in that war will still be real, and hence still hold their properties of value and significance. Quotes from both Brill and Frankl imply they hold something like this four-dimensionalist view:

“While we may not always be remembered or while our actions may not have a positive impact on what goes on in the universe forever, it does seem that our actions generate facts about us that will exist eternally. Facts about us (of the sort, “So-and-so did such-and-such”) arise and never cease to obtain. Billions and billions of years from now facts about us will obtain as they do now, just as it will be true then, as it is now, that 2 + 2 = 4.” (Brill, 2007, p.23)

“the only really transitory aspects of life are the potentialities; but as soon as they are actualized, they are rendered realities at that very moment; they are saved and delivered into the past, wherein they are rescued and preserved from transitoriness. For, in the past, nothing is irrevocably lost but everything is irrevocably stored... Man constantly makes his choice concerning the mass of present potentialities; which of these will be condemned to non-being and which will be actualized. Which choice made an actuality once and forever, an immortal “footprint in the sands of time”? At any moment, man must decide, for better or for worse, what will be the monument of his existence.” (Frankl, 1946, p.122)[[130]](#footnote-130)

Finally, both Peter Singer and John Smart, make explicit use of four-dimensionalism to soothe worries that one might have surrounding the SPI or the permanence argument:

“If we regard time as a fourth dimension… We can then make that four-dimensional world a better place by causing there to be less pointless suffering in one particular place, at one particular time, than there would otherwise have been.” (Singer, 1993, p.274)

“For some the worry is that life may come to an end. Some have even worried about the heat death of the universe. … Thinking four-dimensionally may help. Life is (tenselessly) somewhere in space-time: why should we worry that it is not everywhere?” (Smart, 1999, p.16)

Taking up a four-dimensionalist or eternalist view of time, the claim that only achievements with *permanently* detectable effects can be significant sounds unfounded and implausible, as does the claim that a life can only retain its significance if the person themselves persists eternally. What we were worried about was that our lives and the value of our achievements could be entirely destroyed, but it is clear that (on this conception of time at least), the destruction of their physical traces does not necessarily constitute the destruction of the lives or the achievements themselves. Hence, the meaningfulness of the life, too, is potentially safe – logged eternally in the metaphorical history book of the universe.

Moreover, and importantly, I believe the four-dimensionalist view of time is the more plausible one. Obviously taking on a full discussion of the metaphysics of time would be a huge debate to wade into and would take me too far off track. Nevertheless, there are several serious problems which afflict the presentist theory. For example, the presentist view of time makes it impossible to talk meaningfully about people or events which happened in the past (Markosian, 2016). For instance, if I say that Plato was Socrates’ student, a full-blown presentist will not be able to make sense of this assertion, since neither Plato nor Socrates are present beings and so, for the presentist, neither actually exists. Thus, it would be as if I was speaking of fairy-tale characters. Similarly, it seems as though a presentist would have problems asserting such indisputable truths as ‘there were dinosaurs’, because there exists nothing to act as a ‘truth-maker’ for this claim (Markosian, 2016).

On the other hand, the four-dimensionalist view of time does not suffer these problems and fits much easier with our normal ways of talking about things. Furthermore, the four-dimensionalist view of time also aligns, in a way presentism cannot, with our current best scientific picture of how the universe works. In particular, Einstein’s well-evidenced theory of special relativity demonstrates that time and space are not distinct but are actually bound together in one continuum known as 'spacetime'. This supports the premise that time is simply another dimension which objects can be located on, in addition to the three dimensions of space. Moreover, special relativity posits that the closer something travels to the speed of light, the slower time will pass for that object relative to observers at rest. This is because everything must be moving at a constant speed through time *and* space, and so when something’s spatial speed increases, its speed through time must decrease to compensate. Again, it would be difficult to make sense of this if reality was just the present temporal slice of the universe; it appears to require time to function as a fourth dimension alongside the dimensions of space as part of one shared manifold.[[131]](#footnote-131)

In conclusion, I believe it is permissible to side with the four-dimensionalists and reject the presentist view of time. Given this, we also have cause to reject the SPI and side with our more everyday intuition that lives and actions can be significant and have value even if, at some point in the future, they and their consequences will disappear from then on. It is true that eventually we will die and so, unless we discover the key to immortality, will the rest of our species. It is also true that eventually the universe will *look* the same as it would have had we never existed at all. Nevertheless, accepting four-dimensionalism, this universe will *not* be completely identical to the world in which we never existed; certain facts hold true in the former which are false in the latter – facts about the things we created, the people we helped, and the challenges we overcame. Although there will be no one left to remember these facts and no way to re-discover them, if we did things of significance, it remains true for all eternity that we did them and they remain significant.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this chapter, I considered two broad immortalist arguments which held that our mortal lives could not be meaningful because they could never become or remain significant. In the first case, this was allegedly because we do not live long enough to make much of a mark on the universe. However, I argued that even the relatively small-scale impacts of human beings can be considered significant so long as we use human-scale standards of significance, and we have seen no reason to think this would be illegitimate. The fact that the results of our lives will be short-lived compared to the rest of time does not therefore force us to conclude that we are inevitably insignificant. That is one perspective on our situation, but one we are entitled to reject.

Next, I considered the argument that the significance or meaningfulness of our lives would eventually be eliminated from reality, either because we would die and disappear, or because humanity as a whole would. Nevertheless, I argued that neither version of this ‘permanence argument’ poses a threat to the meaningfulness of our lives, provided we accept something like an eternalist or four-dimensionalist metaphysics of time. According to this perspective, if I have done significant things, then the facts that make my actions significant will hold true in all spatial and temporal locations. Thus, my life will be significant, if it is, wherever and whenever we examine it from, even if we are standing at the desolate end of the universe which no longer contains any trace of humanity. Granting this, mortal lives still stand a chance of being meaningful, provided they also possess sufficient purposefulness and coherence. It is this last component of meaningfulness which will be the focus of Chapter 8.

8. Mortality and coherence

“Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window, and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.”

(Heller, 1961, Chapter 41, Para 130)

In the previous chapters, I have examined the immortalist claims that death renders our lives meaningless either by ensuring they are inadequately purposeful or significant in some way, or by destroying the significance or meaningfulness they had gained. In each case, I rejected these claims as wrong or, at the very least, gave equally legitimate and plausible alternative accounts which painted a more optimistic picture of our circumstances. Nevertheless, if my characterisation of meaningfulness in Chapter 2 is correct, there is one final ground upon which the immortalists could argue that mortal life is necessarily meaningless: that mortal lives are inescapably *incoherent* in some relevant sense.

In this chapter, I will consider and reject arguments that mortal life must be incoherent because our life-stories are cut short by death (8.1) or because death introduces some *absurdity* into our lives. In 8.2, I will characterise what I mean by absurdity and why it is a problem for meaningfulness. In 8.3, I will consider four aspects of mortality which might be seen as absurd, before dismissing them as insufficiently serious to count as undermining the entire coherence of our lives (or even as necessarily *absurd* from every perspective we might adopt). Finally, in 8.4, I will discuss two further absurdities which might not be so easily dismissed before showing that these needn’t be seen as *inevitable* consequences of our mortality.

8.1 Mortal life-stories

In Chapter 5, I proposed that one way to determine or evaluate the coherence of a person’s life was to examine their life-story – the reasonably true narrative which could hypothetically be told about their life – to see how comprehensible this story was. If their life-story was adequately comprehensible, I suggested, then we should see their life as being sufficiently coherent to (potentially) be meaningful. If their life-story was sufficiently incomprehensible, on the other hand, I suggested that this entails their life itself was problematically incoherent and thus could not be meaningful.[[132]](#footnote-132)

Given the above, the first place to look, to determine the coherence of mortal lives, will presumably be the comprehensibility of the life-stories of mortal beings. Do we have any reasons for thinking that the life-stories of mortals would be incomprehensible overall? Well, in Chapter 5, one argument we considered against immortality was that the life-stories of immortal beings, being infinite, would never receive proper conclusions or endings, and that that could potentially undermine their comprehensibility. Nevertheless, I noted that this argument might be turned against the defenders of mortality, given that the kind of ending required by the argument is most plausibly understood as *closure*, and that death needn’t always provide such closure.

Indeed, Geoffrey Scarre writes that “Short lives are like narratives without a proper middle or ending” (1997, p.274) and goes on to claim that *all* human lives should rightly be described as ‘short’ in this way because death *always* comes too soon for us. Putting this in terms of Carroll’s (2007) ‘closure’, Scarre could be read as claiming that *no* mortal life-story ever goes on long enough to secure answers to all the presiding questions which had been raised, because death terminates the story too early. In other words, every mortal life would be like a movie that was missing its final reels or a novel without its final chapters; the key information necessary to give closure to the questions raised by the piece will be missing.[[133]](#footnote-133) Thus, if such information is necessary for these stories to be considered adequately comprehensible, the likelihood of mortal lives ever appearing coherent overall seems bleak.

Nevertheless, there are two responses we could make to this argument, both of which I briefly mentioned in 5.3. First, we can point out that we needn’t see a person’s death as the strict termination of their life-story. Indeed, there are many cases where it seems only fitting to include many post-mortem facts and events within an individual’s own life-story, such as, for Van Gogh, the eventual popularity of his paintings. Granting this, it seems wrong to say that no mortal’s life-story will achieve closure because they die too soon. Even if the individual dies before their life-story wraps up all its plotlines and answers all its presiding macro-questions, these questions can still receive their answers *after* this death. To take Van Gogh as our example again, if the main narrative question in his life-story was about his success as an artist, then his life-story may not have achieved closure at the point of his death, but surely has now that his paintings are exhibited in art galleries across the world. Thus, even if a person dies before their life-story has reached closure, it can still reach closure *eventually*, and hence there appears to be no problem for their life-story’s comprehensibility.

Second, we may also reject the assumption that reaching narrative closure *is* actually necessary for a life-story to count as adequately comprehensible overall. Indeed, there are many stories and films which end rather abruptly, perhaps deliberately denying some measure of closure to their audience. Yet, this does not inevitably condemn such stories to complete incomprehensibility. The finale of *Six Feet Under* jumps forward through time to show the lives and deaths of all its principal characters, whereas the finale of *The Sopranos* cuts to black in the middle of a scene. However, I think it would be wrong to say that this difference of ending is significant enough to render The Sopranos inadequately comprehensible overall, even compared to the ultimately closure-granting ending of Six Feet Under.

If this observation is correct, then it seems to follow that the overall comprehensibility of a piece is not something that can be destroyed simply by a lack of complete closure; a story can be adequately comprehensible overall, as The Sopranos is, in virtue of its content and the narrative relations and structure within its plotlines, even if not all of the questions it raises get answered. This means that it wouldn’t be such a disaster for the meaningfulness of a mortal’s life (or an immortal’s life) if their life-story *never* got closure. It might be that their life-story could be adequately comprehensible overall even without this narrative element.

This claim fits with our intuitions about real-life cases too; for instance, as I noted in 5.3, Martin Luther King’s life-story, one might argue, has not yet reached full narrative closure given the struggle of improving race-relations in the USA continues on. Yet, if we can make sense of King’s life at this present date, not knowing the final answer to this question – and I submit that we can – it does not appear that this lack of closure poses a serious problem for the comprehensibility of his life-story. Thus, even if many mortal lives end without closure and perhaps *never* achieve such closure, there is still a gap the immortalist must overcome if they wish to claim that this renders mortal lives inadequately comprehensible overall. Furthermore, given the patent comprehensibility (and meaningfulness) of lives like King’s, it seems that finding anything to bridge this gap in their argument is unlikely.

Are there any other reasons for thinking that mortal life-stories must inevitably be incomprehensible overall? Other problems raised in Chapter 5, such as the revisability of the narrative meaning of events within our life-stories by future events (5.2), I argued are not actually problematic with regard to the comprehensibility of such narratives. Alternatively, the structural problems of overall shapelessness or incompleteness (5.4) are not that relevant to mortals’ life-stories. Equally, while it certainly would count against the comprehensibility of someone’s life-story if all they did was pointless or futile, I hope to have demonstrated earlier that mortal life needn’t necessarily be seen as either; mortal humans are neither inevitably wrapped up in some circular ‘supermarket regress’ of toil (6.2), nor striving towards some interruptible overarching goal as the sole vindicator of their life’s work (6.3).

Interestingly, however, this last observation does show that there is a connection or overlap between two components of meaningfulness: purposefulness and coherence. Specifically, if one’s life is involved in futile or pointless activity, this appears to undermine *both* its purposefulness *and* its level of coherence. As I established in Chapter 2, however, coherence cannot be totally subsumed under purposefulness, since it also involves a measure of the comprehensibility of other aspects of one’s life, such as the structure of one’s life-story and the appropriateness of one’s most important beliefs, efforts, or guiding aspirations. In the latter cases, though I have not touched on it much so far, it does seem intuitive that a life would be less coherent overall, regardless of its overall structure, if the individual was, say, driven by patently false or ridiculous notions. For instance, even the life of someone who cured cancer would have its coherence *and meaningfulness* undermined, it seems, if they only did so because they believed that Santa had asked them to.

To argue that mortal life is incoherent, therefore, the immortalist could attempt to find some of these new sorts of incoherencies – e.g. efforts, beliefs, or desires which are wildly out of line with reality or with each other – which are also brought about by our mortality in some sense. To phrase this differently, they could try to find something caused by our mortality which introduces a problematic measure of what I will call *absurdity* into our lives. I will move on to discuss this possibility in the following sections.

8.2 What is absurdity?

In the previous two chapters I discussed, amongst others, one argument which held that our lives’ efforts were pointless because they were aimed at mere self-perpetuation, and another which held that our lives were insignificant because their effects, and humanity as a whole, will eventually disappear some millions of years into the future. Ultimately, I rejected both arguments, and Thomas Nagel (1971) came to the same conclusion about their failure. Nevertheless, he admits that “they attempt to express something that is difficult to state, but fundamentally correct” (p.718). That is, he argues, that human life is *absurd*.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the argument that our lives are characterised by some measure of absurdity *as a consequence of our mortality*, and that this absurdity is sufficient to render them incoherent and meaningless as a result. The absurdity argument could be put something like this:

1. For a life to be meaningful it must be coherent.
2. A life which is characterised by absurdity cannot be coherent.
3. Death renders the lives of mortal beings absurd.
4. Mortal beings cannot have meaningful lives.

Before providing more detail to this argument, the concept of absurdity must be described so that its connection to coherence and meaningfulness can be made clear. Then I will move on to give some examples of absurdities which mortality might allegedly introduce into our lives.

Joel Feinberg (1992) likens a ‘paradigmatic’ kind of absurdity to the irrational, such that if someone believed or acted in a way that was irrational they would be doing something absurd. Indeed, this is close to how the term is intended in philosophical arguments, where some claim is labelled as ‘absurd’ if it conflicts with other accepted assumptions and thus, Feinberg notes, it would be irrational to adopt it (p.155). Nevertheless, Feinberg adds that mere irrationality may not capture the strength of what is intended by the term 'absurd'. For instance, I might hold two beliefs which are incompatible with each other, but if these beliefs are inconsequential, or the incompatibility can only be realised through very careful consideration, then despite my belief in both of them being irrational, we might not rush to call it absurd (at least outside the philosophy classroom).

Granting this, Feinberg argues that “The absurd is what is *palpably* untrue or unreasonable, outlandishly and preposterously so” (p.156). In other words, for absurdity to be present, it is not enough for us to merely believe or do something irrational, it must be that this irrationality is 'extreme' in some way, “whether that be the apparently knowing assertion of manifestly false propositions, or the apparently voluntary making of manifestly unreasonable decisions” (p.156). On such grounds, someone in the present day believing in string theory might not be absurd, even if the theory turns out to be internally inconsistent, but believing the Earth is flat would be absurd, since it flies so starkly in the face of the evidence clearly before us.

I think it makes sense to identify cases of palpable or extreme irrationality as absurd. Nevertheless, Nagel provides some everyday examples of apparent 'absurdity' which needn’t involve any actual irrationality. For instance:

“someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down.” (Nagel, 1971, p.718)

In each case here, the actions would perhaps be irrational if they were done deliberately, but assuming they are the results of accidents or ignorance, no one appears to have actually done or believed anything irrationally. What makes these examples absurd then? One suggestion could be that there is something *humorous* about each of these cases. However, Nagel gives an alternative account of what unites these instances of absurdity, claiming that “a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality” (p.718).[[134]](#footnote-134) In other words, where we want or expect one thing to be true or to happen, but something drastically different happens, then that turn of events was, in some way, absurd. For instance, in Nagel’s final example, there is clearly a drastic discrepancy between our pretensions and reality; specifically, our pretension that a knighting ceremony be dignified, and the undignified way this particular ceremony turned out.[[135]](#footnote-135)

The concept of absurdity as discrepancy between expectations or aspirations and reality also evokes another famous discussion of the absurd found in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Here Camus describes absurdity as “that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints” (1942a, p.50) and elsewhere writes, “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (p.31-32). In other words, for Camus, our existence is absurd because, in general, reality cannot possibly live up to the expectations and desires we have for our lives. The discrepancy at the heart of this alleged absurdity is thus the discrepancy between our deepest aspirations and our actual circumstances. For example, Camus notes that, “If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this world would have a meaning or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world” (p.51). The implication is that our typical human desires are somehow unnatural and do not fit the real confines of our existence, and that is what is so absurd.

Furthermore, Nagel’s conception of absurdity as a conflict between aspirations and reality also aligns with a further necessary condition of absurdity given by Feinberg, though Feinberg’s condition here is broader. Specifically, he notes that where there is absurdity, there are always “two things clashing or in disharmony, distinguishable entities that conflict with one another” (1992, p.156). Whereas Nagel’s definition focuses on just two groups of things which can be in disharmony (our attitudes and reality), Feinberg proposes that what is necessary for absurdity is merely *any* incongruity or clash between any two things. Moreover, this element might in fact subsume Feinberg’s initial characterisation of absurdity as irrationality since, in cases of genuinely absurd irrationality, there will always be some disharmony present as well: e.g. between the individual’s beliefs and their actions, or between two of their beliefs that conflict.

I think Feinberg’s broader condition is correct here, and the fact that absurdity can be present in cases without specific discrepancies between our expectations or aspirations and reality (Nagel’s definition), can be seen in the example of Sisyphus, who Albert Camus calls “the absurd hero” (1942a, p.108), and is seen as having an archetypically absurd existence. Presumably this is because of the nature of his punishment, where his “whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing” (Camus, 1942a, p.108). However, Feinberg points out that, on Nagel's narrower understanding of absurdity, Sisyphus' life might not necessarily count as absurd, provided he had no pretensions or aspirations beyond his pointless task; i.e. if he neither believed nor desired his rock-rolling would accomplish anything, there may be no discrepancy present in Sisyphus’ actions of the kind Nagel requires for absurdity.

Nevertheless, Sisyphus’ existence does seem absurd – as Feinberg notes: “few would deny the synthetic judgement that there *is* an absurdity in pointless labors that will plainly come to nothing” (1992, p.154) – and Feinberg’s second broader understanding of absurdity allows for this. In short, even if Sisyphus does not desire or believe he is accomplishing anything with his rock-rolling, there would still be *some* disharmony present: a disharmony between the immense effort he puts in to his work and the total lack of reward or value it results in (p.158). In Feinberg's words, even a disillusioned Sisyphus still suffers from “a kind of discrepancy, or massive disproportion, between means and ends” (p.158). Thus, we might think Sisyphus' life is absurd on Feinberg’s account because, regardless of Sisyphus’ intentions or expectations, he works *so hard* and still achieves nothing.

I think it is right to broaden out our understanding of absurdity to potentially involve other kinds of clashes besides those directly involving human aspirations and reality, certainly as far as including discrepancies between our efforts and the value of their results.[[136]](#footnote-136) Yet, there remains a question about exactly how broad we want to leave our account. For instance, could there be absurdities which don’t *directly* involve human attitudes or efforts at all? Imagine walking down a street of small, humble cottages and then spotting a vast 100-room palace sitting amongst them. If there is something absurd about this situation, that implies that our account of absurdity should perhaps be maximally broad, as Feinberg suggests, given this case does not *directly* include any human attitudes or efforts; the discrepancy the alleged absurdity arises from here is merely between the sizes and styles of physical objects.

That acknowledged and accepted, there does not appear to be any absurdity present in the vast size discrepancy between Mars and Jupiter. Clearly not *every* case of discrepancy in the universe counts as absurd then. But what makes one of these situations (arguably) absurd and not the other? Even if absurdity can potentially be present in disharmonies between *any* two things, what decides which instances of disharmony in nature count as absurd and which don’t? I believe the answer has something to do with our *own* expectations as the *observers* of these situations. Specifically, some scenario will appear absurd *to us* when:

1. we perceive it as involving some extreme discrepancy or disharmony, *and*
2. that disharmony strikes us as unexpected or incongruous in some way (i.e. it clashes with our assumptions or expectations).

Thus, we judge the palace scenario to be absurd because the discrepancy it involves violates our own preconceptions about the typical homogeneity of neighbourhoods, whereas we have no such preconceptions about the sizes of planets and so do not judge that discrepancy to be incongruous or absurd. Similarly, we might find it absurd to see a person’s pants falling down in a knighting ceremony because we find the existence of this drastic discrepancy (between the pretensions of the attendees and the undignified reality) completely unexpected. Yet, if we had wearily predicted this turn of events all along (say, because we knew the honouree refused to wear their belt and had been losing their pants all day), it might not appear incongruous or absurd to us at all.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Characterising absurdity this way, it is clear how such absurdity could interact with meaningfulness. If I perceive a life to be filled with absurdities, then that means I will perceive it to be filled with various unexpected disharmonies, imbalances, and conflicts, and these incongruities – such as efforts which are drastically misaligned with goals or circumstances, inconsistent or contradictory desires, or beliefs which do not fit reality – will clearly harm my estimation of the overall *coherence* of the life. Thus, the more of these absurd incongruities we perceive in a life, the less sense the life will make to us, and the less likely it will be to strike us as meaningful overall. Indeed, a life might plausibly end up meaningless in our eyes as a result of just *one* instance of absurdity, provided this absurdity was fundamental or important enough. For instance, if a person’s primary purpose was to care for their family but, unbeknownst to them, their family were entirely undeserving, hated them, and mocked their devotion, then this single disharmony might be enough to completely undermine their life’s coherence for us. Alternatively, if a person lived their entire life according to rules they thought were objectively binding but were, in fact, made up by a cult to manipulate them, this too might also be enough to make their life seem incoherent overall. Nevertheless, the important lesson here is that, in either case, the more absurdity one perceives in a life, the less likely one will find that life coherent and meaningful.

However, different individuals can have different preconceptions, and so it seems to follow that a particular discrepancy or disharmony could appear strange or unexpected to one person but not to another depending on the particular assumptions they hold. Thus, two individuals could have completely opposing opinions on whether or not some scenario was absurd. For instance, whether or not the concept of polygamy strikes one as absurd will likely depend on the culture one was raised in. Moreover, it does not appear possible to say who would be correct in such a disagreement since there does not appear to be any overriding objective truth to the matter. If my above proposal is accurate, then we are capable of perceiving things as absurd only because we are limited in our knowledge of the world and possess certain personal and cultural preconceptions and are hence capable of finding certain scenarios to be strange or unexpected. Yet, if we were to try to examine things from a fully-informed, impersonal, and objective perspective (which would normally be authoritative in other disagreements), we would already know everything about everything and hence nothing which happens *could possibly* strike us as unexpected or strange; e.g. we would be aware, as a neutral fact of social science, that it is normal for men to have multiple wives in some cultures, and that would be that. Thus, nothing could ever count as absurd for such a standpoint (indeed, the concept might even cease to make sense).

Granting this, it appears as though there can be no objective truth about whether or not any scenario counts as absurd. Rather, whether something counts as absurd will ultimately be relative to the particular perspectives it is examined from on the basis of the expectations or preconceptions of those perspectives. It may be tempting for a person to say, ‘I know I perceive this event as absurd, but is it *really* absurd?’ However, this question is suspect. If it simply means, ‘Are the facts of this event, which lead me to perceive it as absurd, really as I understand them?’ then it is legitimate. Specifically, if a person has not properly grasped the basic facts of the scenario they are evaluating, we might say that their judgement of its absurdity does not apply to the actual scenario, and hence the actual scenario may not ‘really’ be absurd (even for them) because it is not really as they see it. Nevertheless, if the question means, ‘Granting my understanding of this scenario is accurate, am I *right* to see it as absurd?’ then the question is illegitimate and has no answer. It appears absurd to *that* person and that is all that can be said on the matter. Thus, whether or not some aspect of our *lives* counts as absurd or not can only be stated relative to particular perspectives on those lives.[[138]](#footnote-138)

To reiterate, I see evaluations of absurdity being made in the following way: a person, with their own imperfect knowledge of the world and personal assumptions/expectations, comes across some situation X. After learning about X, they perceive it as involving some drastic discrepancy or disharmony, and the presence of that disharmony strikes them as strange or unexpected on the basis of their prior preconceptions. They then come to experience X as being absurd to some degree and, as a result, harder to comprehend than things which do not appear absurd to them. Furthermore, and crucially, the fact that they perceive X as absurd arises from the combination of X’s features and their particular expectations about the world; someone else with different expectations might experience X as not-absurd, and that is as unproblematic as two people having different opinions on the taste of chocolate ice-cream.

The situation here is similar to the one we found in the previous chapter where we discovered that there was no objective truth about whether something counted as significant or not, only whether something counted as significant relative to particular thresholds or standpoints. Identically, the overall coherence of a life is also something which can only be stated relative to certain standpoints or observers. There are thus two ways in which one’s personal standpoint informs one’s evaluation of the overall meaningfulness of a life: the threshold for significance one holds and the preconceptions informing one’s assessment of absurdity/coherence. This relativity does not mean that our investigation into mortality and absurdity has to stop here, however. Specifically, there are two questions we might still be interested in asking:

1. Is mortal life inevitably absurd (and hence incoherent and meaningless) when viewed from an ordinary/everyday human perspective?
2. Is mortal life inevitably absurd when viewed from *any* perspective one could reasonably adopt?

It would be interesting to know the answer to 1 for the same reasons I suggested, in the previous chapter, it might be reassuring to hear that human life can count as *significant* according to an everyday perspective or threshold of significance. We care whether our lives can appear significant according to this ordinary perspective because, firstly, this is a perspective which we are likely to share, and secondly, it is also the perspective from which most evaluations of the meaningfulness of particular lives actually get made. Similarly, we may also care whether mortal life necessarily looks absurd according to an ‘ordinary’ perspective (i.e. from the perspective of any clear-thinking, reasonably informed member of the human race, abstracted from any particular culture or time-period) because, if it does, this is a judgement that most people are likely to share, given it will be informed by expectations/assumptions that are relatively fundamental or universally human. It also stands as a kind of middle-ground between more idiosyncratic or extreme perspectives, and thus could plausibly serve to settle some differences of opinion.

It is worth stressing, however, that despite being an interesting perspective to focus on, the judgements of this everyday perspective regarding something’s absurdity will not be any more authoritative or correct than the judgements of any other perspective. Thus, if the answer to question 1 is yes – which I will label the ‘limited immortalist conclusion’ – that would still not compel us to admit that mortal life is necessarily meaningless full-stop; provided we could point to another perspective on our mortal lives which did *not* portray them as absurd and incoherent, we could simply dismiss the immortalists’ claims as only being rationally compelling from certain standpoints which one needn’t adopt. Indeed, this is analogous to the move I made at the end of the previous chapter in defence of the charge that mortal life looks insignificant from the SSA. To prevent this kind of move, the immortalist would have to show that *every* available standpoint portrays mortality as absurd – which I will label the ‘robust immortalist conclusion’ – and hence one cannot merely dismiss their charge as before. This is why, throughout this chapter, I will also be trying to provide a negative answer to question 2.[[139]](#footnote-139)

In the next section I will outline four disharmonies which death appears to introduce into our lives and which may well be perceived as incongruous and absurd by an everyday human perspective. However, I will provide two responses one could make to resist the inference from these disharmonies to the immortalist conclusions outlined above. Then, in section 8.4, I will outline two more problematic death-caused disharmonies which plausibly would entail even the *robust* immortalist conclusion, before finally demonstrating how the presence of these disharmonies in our lives can either be disputed or avoided.

8.3 Four potential death-related absurdities

Having outlined the conditions under which we perceive something as absurd, and why perceptions of absurdity in a life would undermine our estimation of its overall coherence and meaningfulness, we can now move on to assess the claim that *death* renders life absurd. This can be understood alternatively as the limited claim that death renders life absurd for an everyday human perspective or the more robust claim that death renders life absurd for *any* perspective we might be able to adopt. To do either, it will need to be true that death introduces some kind of extreme disharmony or disharmonies into our lives, which would be perceived as strange or unexpected from those standpoints. Camus may well have been suggesting something like this when he stated that death is ‘the most obvious’ absurdity in our human lives (1942a, p.58), but more detail is needed to assess this claim. Consequently, in this section, I will present four plausible suggestions of disharmonies which might be alleged to arise from our mortality, each increasing in seriousness, before assessing whether they might (individually or collectively) entail either the limited or robust immortalist conclusions.

(a) The dignity of a human being vs the indignity of death and decomposition.

If the absurd is perceived as arising from certain instances of extreme disharmony, then one potential case of absurdity which results from mortality might be felt in the juxtaposition between a living, conscious human being, and the senseless, rotting corpse they will become. A quote from Raymond Tallis highlights this point:

“Disrobe... and look at yourself in the mirror. The image is of an earlier time-slice of the item that will be your corpse... You are exchanging glances with the past tense of liquefying carrion or a handful of ashes.” (Tallis, 2015, p.22)

On a similar note Ernest Becker writes how man:

“has an awareness of his own splendid majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever” (Becker, 1973, p.26).

If we compare a healthy human being to the decomposing material that will eventually lie in their graves, it can be hard to suppress a feeling of absurdity. The strength of this absurd feeling is, I think, partly motivated by the kind of disgust we feel when reflecting on disease, injury, and the breakdown of our biological form. It is this disgust which gives certain body-horror movies their impact; as they depict humans being dismembered or metamorphosing into something alien and unnatural, we often feel a sense of revulsion and fear. The idea, that our smoothly functioning bodies will one day succumb to this revolting eventuality, combined with our sense of ourselves as somehow dignified or otherwise above such an animal fate, certainly constitutes a fairly drastic disharmony and may well leave one with a palpable sense of the absurdity of death or mortal existence.

(b) The incredible skills and capacities of a living human vs the inertness of a corpse.

More than this instinctual feeling of revulsion at what we will become, however, there is a sense of tragedy in what death causes us to lose, besides our dignity and integrity. Tallis, again, describes our corpses in the second person:

“While you are longer and more corpulent than you were the day you came into the world... you are nonetheless as naked and as lacking in estate. Homeless, propertyless, wifeless, childless, friendless, jobless, thoughtless, breathless, pulseless, gazeless, and so completely sensationless as to not be able to experience even numbness.” (Tallis, 2015, p.24)

Not only does death take from us our possessions and friends in a sense, it also steals our capacities in their entirety. No longer will we be able to reason, dream, or plan. Neither will we be able to do such basic animal things as run, or look around, or feel the heat of the sun. We will go from being the most advanced creatures on Earth (possibly even the universe), to mere lumps of matter, “a condition less than that of the lowest of the beasts, one that lacks even the order granted to a crystal” (Tallis, p.16). Through death, we do not just lose our basic human capacities though, but also the specific skills and knowledge that we had worked so hard through life to develop. No longer will we be able to read or write, or play the guitar, or hold conversations about politics – it will all be destroyed in time. This adds to the disharmony one might perceive here; death does not just strip us of the valuable faculties which life handed to us, but also the ones which we struggled so hard to make and find ourselves. Moreover, when we envision this clash between what we are and can be and what we will become, it may well shock and appal us, and even seem to be rather absurd. As Steven Cave puts it:

“To create such a wonderful creature as a human being only to permit him or her to turn into dust seems indeed an extraordinary waste; a cruel cosmic joke at our expense.” (Cave, 2012, p.275)

(c) The seriousness of death’s impact on us vs the triviality or arbitrariness of most deaths.

One last quote from Tallis expresses this third incongruity rather well:

“The mismatch between the difficulty with which we are put together – the love, patience, and painstaking concern necessary for our flourishing – and the ease with which we can be torn into meaningless pieces is shocking... All the care, nurturing, vigilance, protection, education leads like a long upward slope to a cliff face. You have learned to 'Keep away from the edge!' but sooner or later, the edge, built into the very stuff of your lives, comes for you.” (Tallis, 2015, p.16)

Connected to the loss of capacities just discussed, we can identify another potential absurdity involved in death: it does not merely destroy that which is of greatest value to us, it often does so without any ceremony or warning; we can die at any time and through the most trivial and ridiculous of events. As Seana Valentine Shiffrin points out, we are always sad to lose things of value, but there is a ‘special kind of dismay or despair’ when we lose something important unnecessarily or for no good reason (2013, p.149), and this appears to happen regularly with death. Some people have their lives taken during battles or while trying to rescue others from burning buildings, but others will die choking on food or from falling while trying to put on their trousers. According to some statistics, approximately one person is crushed to death by a falling vending machine every year, and thirty by television sets. We would perhaps prefer to perish doing something noble or heroic, but we rarely get such a privilege; sometimes death comes for no good reason at all and sometimes it comes for reasons that strike us as preposterous.[[140]](#footnote-140)

This too, I think, could plausibly be percieved as an absurdity introduced into our existence because of our mortality: the incongruity between the nature of death as a permanent and irrevocable *end* to our lives – the total annihilation of all our future opportunities to carry out projects, pursue relationships, and seek out new experiences – and the carelessness with which the universe, and often other humans, treat those lives.

(d) The effort we expend to escape death vs the inescapability of death.

Finally, we might also see the *inevitability* of death as adding to the potential absurdity of mortal life. Despite death often coming by surprise or for reasons which strike us as trivial, there is a relentlessness to it which makes us uneasy. We are given time on Earth to do with as we please, and for almost all other unwelcome eventualities there are things we can do to avoid or at least ameliorate them. However, as Bertrand Russell notes, “no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave” (1957, p.56). Human beings are gifted with an incredible tool-kit of problem solving abilities but, despite the efforts of scientists and doctors, the problem of death seems insoluble. Despite having unique capacities amongst animals to protect and defend the things we care about, we cannot protect the thing we care about most, eventually we will fail. Another quote from Russell captures the dreadful inescapability of death:

“Brief and powerless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness” (Russell, 1957, p.61).

The disharmony here is clear; we try desperately to avoid death – as I noted in 6.2, often spending much of our waking lives doing nothing other than what is essential for self-preservation – and yet death is unavoidable, sooner or later. Thus, there appears to be an extreme discrepancy present between the implicit aim of our death-avoidance project and the reality of mortal life, and a discrepancy which we may perceive as rather absurd.

The passages above, I believe, identify four extreme disharmonies involving death which someone might plausibly find incongruous and hence absurd. However, we might now ask whether these disharmonies are serious enough to entail either the limited or robust immortalist conclusions – in other words, whether someone examining human life from an everyday perspective in light of these disharmonies would perceive it to be absurd to the point of incoherence, and whether this evaluation would be shared by *any* other perspective one could plausibly adopt.

I believe the answer to both questions is no. First off, even if an observer from the everyday perspective described earlier would find these four disharmonies to be somewhat absurd, one can object to the suggestion that they would therefore find mortal human life to be entirely incoherent. Most individuals’ lives, if they stand a chance of being meaningful in the first place, will contain a large amount of content (relationships, achievements, projects, plans etc.). Yet, most of the disharmonies just outlined arguably only stand as relatively minor twists at the end of each life. It may be that there is something absurd about the trivial nature of a person’s death, or the fact that they will lose their capacities or decompose in an unsavoury manner, but these absurdities do not seem serious enough to undermine the coherence built throughout the rest of the life. That would be like suggesting a film was incoherent overall simply because something very strange, random, or unconnected happened right before the credits rolled. It might harm the overall coherence of the film, but it certainly wouldn’t undermine it completely.

The most potentially troublesome disharmony covered above is perhaps the last one (our striving to avoid death vs its inevitability), as this does seem to reach back into the life and its efforts in a more sinister way. Yet, we can object to my earlier description of this disharmony as being somewhat unfair or misleading. It is true that we spend a lot of effort trying to avoid death, despite death being seemingly unavoidable; nevertheless, a fairer way of characterising our efforts would perhaps be as striving to *postpone* death as long as possible, and that implicit aim does not appear to clash with the inevitability of death at all. Hence, in this case, there is no real disharmony for absurdity to arise from; our efforts are not absurdly futile in the face of death’s inescapability because we are not really trying to *escape* death at all, just hold it off.

In conclusion, even if we grant that the first three disharmonies are such as to appear absurd to a generic, clear-thinking, member of the human race, the claim that this hypothetical individual would judge mortal life as incoherent overall is much more of a stretch. It is therefore highly dubitable as to whether these absurdities are strong enough to secure the limited immortalist conclusion. However, even if we conceded that they were this strong, they still would not entail the robust immortalist conclusion. To do so it would need to be shown that there is no perspective we can take up on these disharmonies such that they do not appear to be strange or unexpected and hence absurd (and so much so that they undermine the coherence of mortal life entirely). Yet, even if an everyday perspective would perceive them as absurd (which one might argue), there are clearly alternative outlooks one can adopt which would present them in a much less troubling light.

We can start by considering the first kind of absurdity related to death which I identified: (a) the clash between our dignity, and the indignity which overcomes us after death. It is true that there is a particular perspective we can take on death, juxtaposing our current form with that of putrefying flesh, which makes the change seem foul and humiliating. However, this mindset doesn't seem to be the only one we could possess. For instance, if we were to think about death from a more scientific angle, we could see that the particles which had moved through the universe to temporarily constitute our bodies and lives are simply becoming unbonded from each other and returning to circulate through the universe as they had done previously – and there is nothing *necessarily* undignified about that. Alternatively, from a more spiritual perspective, we could even reflect on the actual decomposition of our bodies themselves but interpret this as our 'returning to nature' in some way. In both cases, what previously seemed to be an absurd event now seems respectively a matter of indifference or even something quite natural and positive because our outlook and expectations have changed.

I can think of no good arguments regarding which depiction of death is more legitimate or correct, and so I see no reason why we should not be free to adopt whatever perspective we want on this issue provided we accept the fundamental facts of the matter.[[141]](#footnote-141) Of course, this means one would be free to see death as causing an awful destruction of one's integrity and dignity, and that might lead one to think death rendered one's life somewhat absurd. However, death need not be seen as introducing this absurdity into our lives full-stop; there are less disturbing stances on death available to us from which our eventual decomposition, though certainly disharmonious with the integrity we enjoyed throughout life, is found to be reasonably expected and tolerable and hence not absurd.

I believe the same move can be made with regard to the other three kinds of death-related disharmony noted earlier. It is possible to see a threat of absurdity in the facts that death (b) destroys our impressive capacities, (c) comes unpredictably and often for trivial reasons, despite its seriousness, and (d) is unavoidable, despite our desperate striving. Yet, I believe it is also possible for us to manage our expectations and attitudes in such a way that we would no longer perceive these disharmonies as particularly strange or surprising. There are outlooks we could take on these aspects of death which would allow us to transform it from a cruel joke into something we can accept as a part of life, and as long as these outlooks involve no falsehoods about the nature of death, I see no reason why this move should be objectionable.

For example, we may choose to see that, although living things lose their capacities when they die, this is just an inevitable aspect of biological life, and does not mean our efforts have been wasted, provided we *used* our talents while alive. Thus, we may be able to cast off the expectation that our capacities can or will be preserved forever. Similarly, one could adjust one’s attitudes so that, although death often arrives for trivial reasons, this is no longer something that one considers appalling or surprising. The forces of chance reign in other areas of our lives, why expect it to be any different here? Finally, we could accept what I noted earlier, that throughout all of our self-preservation activity, we were not trying to *avoid* death altogether, but merely postpone the date of our deaths as long as reasonably possible. This goal would avoid coming into conflict with death’s inescapability, and so the disharmony *itself* seems to evaporate. In these ways, though our situation would remain objectively the same, it would no longer be perceived as absurd because of our new perspective.

In short, these four disharmonies do not obviously entail either the limited or robust immortalist conclusions. Even if we accept that they would be perceived as absurd from an everyday human standpoint, we can cast doubt on the suggestion that they would be so substantial as to undermine the coherence of our lives entirely. Moreover, even if this were not the case, they would still not entail the robust immortalist conclusion because I have demonstrated the possibility of accessible alternative perspectives from which these disharmonies needn’t appear absurd. However, in the following section I will consider two disharmonies which are potentially more troubling in that it is far harder to dismiss them using either of these two responses. In other words, if these next disharmonies *are* truly present in our lives, that may well be enough for the immortalist to secure both their limited and robust conclusions.

8.4 Two more problematic death-related absurdities

8.4.1 Inauthenticity towards death

The first new disharmony I will consider arises from a claim I noted in Chapter 3: that, despite being aware that we are mortal, human beings fail to truly *believe* that they will die in some deep sense. As Camus writes, everyone claims to know that they will die, “yet… everyone lives as if no one ‘knew’” (1942a, p.11). Although people will acknowledge intellectually that they are mortal, the charge is that we typically fail to actually *grasp* this fact and all it means for us. We pay lip service to our mortality but, on some level, think that death will never come for *us*.

As an example of such a claim, Martin Heidegger, writes that: “The fact that demise, as an event which occurs, is 'only' empirically certain, is in no way decisive as to the certainty of death” (1962, p.301). By this he means that human beings are aware that they will ‘demise’ in that they know their biological life will come to an end and the animal that they are will perish. Nevertheless, although they are aware of this inevitable ‘demise’, they fail to comprehend the inevitability of their ‘death’, where by ‘death’ Heidegger refers to that final termination of our entire subjective world. The demise of our body is something we are prepared for, Heidegger claims, but the final and irreversible end of our subjective experiences is something that we do not typically anticipate and have not come to terms with. It is this failure to grasp the true subjective world-ending seriousness of our deaths which, according to Ernest Becker, “is what keeps men marching into point-blank fire in wars: at heart one doesn't feel that he will die, he only feels sorry for the man next to him” (1973, p.2).

Why might this be, though? Why think that human beings are typically ignorant or unaware of the deep truth of their mortality? One suggestion is that we find it hard to completely grasp the fact that we are mortal because it is difficult to *conceive* of death itself. As Tallis puts it:

“death... is a tragedy... for which we are existentially unprepared. We have been present since the beginning of time because we have never known – except by report – a time when we did not exist, never lived in a world uninhabited by ourselves…. We cannot conceive of the absence of ourselves.” (Tallis, 2015, p.20)

On the same note, Nagel writes:

“That's what's hard to get hold of: the internal fact that one day this consciousness will black out for good and subjective time will simply stop. My death as an event in the world is easy to think about; the end of my world is not.” (Nagel, 1989, p.225)

Essentially, one could argue that, to imagine our own death, we would have to imagine a world without us in it. However, in any scene that *we* imagine, we will always be present at least to the extent we are taking a perspective on that scene (just as we have always been present for every moment of the universe we have ever witnessed). It is therefore impossible to conceive of our own deaths with 100% accuracy, from a first-person view, because death *means* the elimination of our first-person view on *anything*. It would thus be unsurprising that most human beings fail to fully grasp the reality of their mortality, because it is cognitively challenging for us to imagine what our own deaths would actually involve. Hence, we could end up with what Heidegger (1962) calls an ‘inauthentic’ attitude towards our own deaths: the state described above wherein we purport to believe in our own mortality, but do not really believe it, deep down.

We can see clearly how there is a potential absurdity here; there is a disharmony between our attitudes and reality with regard to our death. Our death, as the end of our subjective world, is inevitable, yet we allegedly think and live as though this is not the case. If this is true, then there is something about our situation as mortal beings which we may well perceive as absurd, and an absurdity which is fairly fundamental, underlying our entire lives and the choices we make. Moreover, this absurdity, unlike the somewhat less significant ones discussed in the last section, is perhaps even enough by itself to render our lives incoherent on the whole. After all, we are creatures whose lives are characterised by mortality and finitude and yet, allegedly, go through life without ever truly grasping this central and critically important fact about ourselves. It is also much more difficult to imagine a perspective we could take up which would *not* perceive this disharmony to be absurd; although I can develop an outlook such that our eventual decomposition does not seem unexpected or strange, the notion that we are *this* fundamentally deluded about our lives is going to be hard to simply shrug off from any angle.

If the above is true, then this disharmony may entail both the limited and robust immortalist conclusions. However, there is perhaps a way we can avoid these conclusions, at least on an individual basis. Specifically, I have argued that absurdity is perceived as arising from certain kinds of extreme discrepancies between distinct things. For instance, in this example, it holds between an individual’s beliefs and the reality of their mortality. Thus, it seems that this absurdity could be eliminated, in principle, by eliminating or altering either of the two things in conflict. Indeed, as Nagel writes, “When a person finds himself in an absurd situation, he will usually attempt to change it, by modifying his aspirations, or by removing himself from the situation entirely” (1971, p.718). In this case, unfortunately, the situation is our lives, and so (ignoring suicide or the development of an immortality serum) it will not be possible to literally remove ourselves from the situation itself. Nevertheless, the first option does look plausible; we could perhaps avoid any absurdity arising simply by altering our problematic belief such that it no longer comes into conflict with our reality as mortal beings.

In Heidegger’s terminology, we should want to develop an *authentic* attitude towards our death, by bringing our beliefs about death in line with reality, even if that is cognitively challenging. Specifically, Heidegger proposes that to attain an authentic attitude towards our mortality, “death must be conceived as one's ownmost possibility, non-relational, not to be outstripped, and – above all – certain” (1962, p.302). In other words, we have to live in full consciousness of the fact that we will die, and with an understanding of precisely what that entails: that it is inevitable, unavoidable, and the final and permanent limit of our potential for acting and experiencing and everything else. If we could develop a fully authentic attitude towards our death, then we may think that any absurdity would have been eliminated. If the underlying disharmony consists in our failure to be fully aware of our mortality, then this disharmony could be disarmed simply by *becoming* better aware of our mortality.

Nevertheless, some might argue that this strategy is not as easily employed here as it might appear, chiefly because a full consciousness of our mortality is *emotionally* difficult or even impossible for us to maintain. This is the thesis at the heart of Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*: “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else” and so we are driven to try and deny or distract ourselves from thoughts of our mortality through any means at our disposal (1973, p.ix). Becker begins by arguing that a fear of death is “behind all our normal animal functioning” since it is a fear of harm and dying which motivates us to invest all the energy we do into self-preservation (p.16). This is the case for all animals, Becker notes, and is why we go to such extreme lengths to escape and avoid dangerous situations. Fear of death is evolutionarily selected for, in a sense, because it is advantageous for the survival of our genes.

Unlike other animals, however, the problem for humans is that we are not just afraid of various deadly things in our environment, we are capable of conceiving of our mortality in abstract. In other words, man “is the only animal in nature who *knows* he will die” (Becker, 1971, p.141). We do not just know that death is a possibility, as animals do; we know that our own death is *inevitable*. Yet, this means the anxiety we would usually feel when faced by specific threats – “the constriction in the chest and throat, the pounding heart, the inner sinking – the feeling of imminent chaos and utter destruction, towards which the organism does not seem to have any resources to oppose” (p.41) – could theoretically be *constantly* present as we know, regardless of our current circumstances, that death is on its way.

Such a feeling, if experienced constantly, would be incompatible with normal functioning. Living constantly under the anxiety which we feel when directly threatened by death would be paralysing. As Becker writes, “I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right” (1973, p.27). Thus, the only option human beings have in order to avoid paralysis and continue living, according to Becker, is to find ways to deny or distract ourselves from our knowledge of death, so that this death-anxiety can be held at bay. Specifically, Becker notes that we may do this through certain literal death-denying ideologies, such as religion, which promise that we are actually immortal, and thus relieves us of our anxiety. Or, on the other hand, we may also subscribe to metaphorical death-denying ideologies or cultures, which can give us a spurious sense of immortality, even whilst acknowledging the demise of our body. For instance, when we create seemingly enduring things like pyramids, temples, or skyscrapers, we may believe, on some level, that we will live on in these things after our deaths. The same might also be true for our families or the causes we have been a part of (p.4-5). In short, we look to our culture to find ways of denying and ignoring our mortality: “Culture opposes nature and transcends it. Culture is in its most intimate intent a heroic denial of creatureliness” (p.159).

The upshot of all this is that the strategy I suggested for avoiding this absurdity in our lives – to simply bring our beliefs, aspirations, and attitudes in line with reality – may not be feasible. If Becker is right, then developing what Heidegger called an authentic attitude towards our own mortality would be impossible or, at the very least, it would result in our being driven mad and paralysed by fear, which would not be conducive to living a meaningful life. Perhaps there is a dilemma here? Either live a purposeful life, achieving things of significance, but with some measure of death-denial and hence absurdity and incoherence in our lives, or try to live authentically and face up to our mortality, but be left so wracked with anxiety that leading a normal life becomes impossible.

If these are the only two options then it looks like mortal beings may face an insurmountable obstacle in their pursuit of a meaningful life; they will either lack coherence, on one hand, or purposefulness and significance, on the other. Nevertheless, I think that Becker’s conclusions are perhaps too pessimistic and thus the dilemma presented above may be false. Whilst I would not deny that most animals seem to have an in-built fear of death, and that even abstract reflection on mortality can, in private hours, give way to the kind of paralysing fear Becker described, I believe there is a way to live without either experiencing crippling death-anxiety or adopting a self-deceptive and inauthentic attitude towards death.

The two options presented above appeared to be either (1) deny one’s death altogether and believe in some illusory immortality (whether real or metaphorical), or (2) live in constant conscious awareness of death and thus be driven mad with fear. Nevertheless, there is a middle way between complete inauthenticity and *constant* reflecting on death, namely: to accept that death is real, inevitable, and does indeed entail the end of our subjective world, but simply to put this thought to the back of our minds. Grasping the truth about our mortality and refusing to deny it does not require relentless dwelling on death. Rather, we can develop an authentic attitude towards death, and try to come to terms with it, *without* it being at the forefront of our mind every day.

As an analogy, consider a delicious meal at an expensive restaurant. If one reflected on how this carefully-prepared meal is merely the precursor for something one would later on flush down the toilet, that might spoil one’s appetite. But this does not mean that eating and enjoying a nice meal must always be an absurd event, involving inauthentic attitudes or self-deception. Refusing to dwell on the ultimate end of the food we are eating does not entail performing any denial or cowardly mental acrobatics; it simply means refusing to dwell on it. One can live honestly and in the truth of the world while still avoiding invasive thoughts which, while true, would unnecessarily spoil one's time. Sometimes the only way to enjoy our Sundays is to ignore that Monday is around the corner but that does not mean we really convince ourselves that Monday will never come, it is simply a pragmatic decision to focus our attention on more pleasant things. Similarly, I propose that we could allow our attention to be taken up with the intricacies of living, most of the time, and thus avoid any paralysing death-anxiety, and that this would not amount to death-denial in any serious sense. Thus, there would be no potentially absurd discrepancy involving our thoughts or actions. We would not be pretending to be immortal, or lying to ourselves, we would simply be focusing on the parts of life which weren’t quite so upsetting.

Moreover, I think we can also recast Becker’s claims about our commitment to monuments, causes, and our family in a more positive light. On Becker’s account, our concern for these things was explained more or less entirely as a mere strategy for denying our mortality by symbolically leaving traces of ourselves behind in more enduring things. Yet, by putting effort into the creation and maintenance of these things, we needn’t be doing anything intellectually dishonest. Perhaps when someone’s death-anxiety is reduced as a result of their investment in some external thing, it is not because they believe *they* will survive in that thing, but rather that they have simply redirected some of their self-interest *away* from themselves and into that thing. In other words, if I find myself caring about my family or my work, and feeling better about my death because of their existence, it needn’t be because I think *I* am present in those objects, but simply because I care about things besides myself, and hence death, when it comes, will not destroy *everything* I care about. Understood this way, there is nothing inauthentic about investing time and effort into external projects and causes, it is simply a way of divesting our self-concern into external things so that what we value in life is more resilient to the threat of our own death.

In conclusion, despite the worry presented by Becker, I think it is entirely possible to live a full and flourishing life *without* having to perform any self-deception or death-denial. Death can be a fearsome thing, but by concerning ourselves with things besides our own person, and by refusing to dwell on it constantly, this fear can be lessened and managed. Thus, it is entirely possible to live on with an authentic attitude towards death, and hence avoid the potential absurdity that death-denial would introduce into our lives. We simply have to check ourselves, from time to time, to ensure we have not slipped from the more legitimate and authentic methods for dealing with death-anxiety into the inauthentic strategies of ignoring death or pretending we are immortal.

8.4.2 The triviality of our efforts

In 8.3 I discussed various absurdities which I argued do not necessarily entail the limited immortalist conclusion (because they are not substantial enough) or the robust immortalist conclusion (because there are perspectives from which they do not actually appear absurd). Then, in the previous section, I discussed a different absurdity which couldn’t be dismissed that way but could be avoided provided we eliminated the disharmony in our lives which it would arise from. In this section, I will consider a final instance of death-related absurdity which, like the previous example, is also very serious and difficult (or even impossible) to shrug off by adopting an alternative standpoint. Specifically, I will be discussing the kind of absurdity noted by Feinberg in 8.2 which arises from the discrepancy between the effort we put into something and the value that is produced. This sort of discrepancy was exemplified in the case of Sisyphus, who spends his days rolling rocks to absolutely no end, but can also be seen in more everyday activities where one’s “objective is manifestly incapable of justifying the drudgery that is meant to achieve it” (Feinberg, 1992, p.158).

If we call such activities ‘trivial’, it is clear how trivial projects could be seen as absurd; there would be a disharmony between the reward of our efforts and the price we pay to get it, and the sort of disharmony which we might find absurd from *any* perspective we can reasonably take up. Knowingly exerting effort for drastically trivial rewards is quite clearly an irrational action and it may simply be impossible for us to *not* find such irrationality unexpected and strange, and hence absurd. Moreover, because the discrepancy underlying this absurdity is constituted by our efforts and their returns themselves, simply changing our attitudes will not solve the problem as it did in the previous case; like Sisyphus’ life, a trivial project would still contain a potentially absurd disharmony regardless of our aspirations.

We can now see another challenge the immortalists could make against the coherence and meaningfulness of a mortal life. As Hepburn puts it:

“A complaint of meaninglessness can be a complaint about a felt disproportion between preparation and performance; between effort expended and the effect of effort, actual or possible.” (Hepburn, 1966, p.133)

In other words, one might worry that our lives were absurd and incoherent, not because of any conflict between our beliefs and reality, or the qualities of a living person compared to the qualities of a corpse, but simply because life demands too much from us, and gives us too little in return. Specifically, the immortalist might argue that, because of our mortality, our lives are skewed so far in the direction of work on the work/life balance, one could not help but see them as absurd. We spend so much time doing unpleasant things merely to stay alive, and get so little joy as a reward, that our existences are fundamentally incoherent. Furthermore, as with death-denial, if this were true of our lives it could well be a serious enough absurdity to completely undermine their overall coherence and could thus entail the robust immortalist conclusion.

In 6.2, in response to the supermarket regress argument, I tried to show that death does not render all our efforts pointless, since we do much *besides* mere self-preservation. However, the question still remains as to whether mortality might, for some reason, render our efforts *trivial* on balance. This is not to say our lives achieve nothing of value, or contain no joy, just that this value we manage to wring out of life is not worth paying the cost of life’s various pains and hardships.

This argument might also connect in some way to the insignificance or permanence arguments considered in Chapter 7. There the immortalists’ charge was that mortal life is meaningless because it is insignificant, and it is insignificant because we cannot make impacts of enough magnitude or permanence to count. In this case, the worry would be that our lives will inevitably appear absurd unless our achievements are worth the effort, but that nothing is worth the effort we must put into our lives unless it is cosmically impactful or permanent.

In general, I think we would be on fairly safe grounds to reject these claims, however. As I initially argued in Chapter 7, one might come to the opinion that nothing we do is significant or worth it unless its consequences are permanently enduring or cosmically large, but there is nothing necessitating we adopt such demanding standards. In the first case, we can point out that our ‘normal’ standards of evaluating whether something is worth doing do not involve cosmically vast thresholds. In the second case, we can point out that, on an eternalist or four-dimensionalist view of time, there is no call to be obsessed with permanence, since everything that happened will be ‘saved’ at its own point in time, so to speak.

We have no obvious reasons for thinking our efforts are absurd unless they fulfil these demanding standards.[[142]](#footnote-142) Yet, a more reasonable worry still stands; that even according to more everyday standards for whether some project was worth doing, our lives still come out as being more trouble than they are worth, and so appear to be absurd on the whole. Adding up all the efforts and struggles involved just to raise us and maintain our human life, we might think that, despite making good use of our time on Earth, the whole adventure had not been worth doing on balance; knowing what we now know, we would not have chosen to go through with it, had we been given the choice.

Is there any reason for seeing mortal human life so negatively though? One way of trying to demonstrate the truth of this evaluation might be to point again to the sheer quantity of supermarket-regress related drudgery that fills our lives. For instance, Moritz Schlick observes that:

“what actually fills up our days almost entirely is activities serving to maintain life. In other words, the content of existence consists in the work that is needed in order to exist.” (Schlick, 1927, p.64)

Similarly, John Kekes notes:

“We sleep, wash, dress, eat; go to work, work, shop… balance the checkbook, clean the house, do the laundry, have the car serviced… These activities constitute everyday life. Everyday life is what life mostly is. Keeping it going, however, involves constant struggle… If we fail, we suffer. And what do we gain from success? No more than some pleasure, a brief sense of triumph, perhaps a little peace of mind. But these are only interludes of well-being, because our difficulties do not cease. It is natural to ask then why we should continue on this treadmill.” (Kekes, 2000, p.17)

And putting this triviality argument very explicitly in terms of coherence Brill writes:

“if our lives are to make sense, if living them is reasonable, then the effort we exert in performing these [everyday] tasks—which do seem to make up the bulk of wakeful living—must be compensated by experiences and activities that are intrinsically valuable. However, when we step back and evaluate our lives from birth to death, the quantity and quality of intrinsically valuable states of affairs do not adequately compensate for the quantity and (negative) quality of our tasks.” (Brill, 2007, p.12)

To reiterate, the argument being made here is that our lives are inarguably absurd because the work and pain that goes into both our projects themselves as well as the task of simply staying alive – which provides the opportunity for these projects – far outweighs any benefits these projects might provide to us *or* other people. The goal of all our nine-to-fives is to maintain our lives so that we can then try to accomplish something of value or experience some pleasure, but our successes are too small for the overall project of living to be worth carrying on with. Thus, there is an extreme disharmony between our efforts and their results, so much so that human life is critically absurd, and from any perspective available to us.

Nevertheless, there would be two ways that people might avoid this absurdity in life, Brill points out (2007, p.12). The first would be if we could somehow make a *huge* impact, as did historical figures like Gandhi or Martin Luther King. For these people, the large value created by their work might have been enough to render their striving worthwhile overall, or at least non-trivial. The second way would be if we were rich or could otherwise live a life of luxury where we were taken care of, rather than having to work so hard to take care of ourselves. In this case, the balance between effort and reward would not be absurdly out of proportion, but mainly because the life would have involved so little effort (p.12).

If this was true, then mortality wouldn’t be strictly incompatible with living a meaningful life; provided we did enough good, or avoided enough suffering, our lives might come out as worthwhile on balance. Nevertheless, we could still be concerned that, for the vast majority of us who are not historically significant and who live as slaves to the office or factory, our lives might seem “upon honest reflection… rather pathetic” (Brill, 2007, p.12). And again, we could lay at least part of the blame for this at the feet of mortality since, if we were immortal, we would be able to achieve so much more (by living longer) and endure so much less toil and suffering (since we would spend less time on the supermarket-regress). Mortality might be what makes life appear absurd for many of us, therefore, even if the relationship is not necessary.

We can try to resist this bleak conclusion, however, and the most obvious strategy is to cast doubt on the claim that our work/life balance is actually that drastically skewed for the majority of people. Brill tries to do just this by noting various ways in which we cause good to come about in the world which we might not usually be conscious of. In doing so, he adds some weight to the 'life' side of the scales in order to reduce the disparity between effort and reward, and hence reduce any incongruity and absurdity present. One thing Brill stresses in particular is the knock-on effect our moral and productive actions can take. For instance, the film *It's a Wonderful Life*:

“shows the great extent to which an ordinary, decent person can have a positive effect… Most remarkable about the film is its illustration of the snowball effect, both the positive snowball effect virtuous acts can have on parts of the world and the negative snowball effect the removal of virtuous acts can have. The film shows that while the immediate effects of good acts done are impressive enough, the ensuing chain reaction can multiply the significance of good acts exponentially.” (Brill, 2007, p.19)

In short, life may seem absurd because the value of our actions does not appear to vindicate out efforts, but this may only be because we are ignorant of the true value we produce. Furthermore, we might think the triviality argument over-exaggerates the degree to which our paid work is merely instrumentally valuable toil. In fact, though the statistics are sometimes depressing, large proportions of people claim to enjoy their work and hence, for these individuals, there will be some reward in the nine-to-five itself. For instance, many individuals anecdotally report that they would continue to work even if they won the lottery. This indicates that there is more to be gained from work, in some people’s estimation, than simply a pay-cheque. Additionally, the triviality argument may be accused of ignoring the value generated in the actual *product* of our jobs themselves. The work we do is hardly ever *just* good for keeping us alive; I would suggest that there is at least some value created in almost any paid work to be found in our society, whether we work in a school, a sewage treatment plant, or an assembly line.[[143]](#footnote-143)

Finally, though there are certainly inherent *costs* of simply living – the struggle of the work-week, and the aches and pains of animal existence – might there not also be inherent benefits involved in living itself? Even if we have to spend all day in the office, there might be passive rewards to be picked up from life at every moment: a friendship with a colleague, the view from one's window, the taste of one's packed lunch, and the sound of birds from outside. There may even be some value, more fundamentally, in the simple fact that we are alive and experiencing *something*, whatever it is.[[144]](#footnote-144)

Whether all these things make the average life worth living, I find it impossible to say for certain. For one thing, even if they do, there is such variance among human lives that even if most of us live worthwhile lives there will be some unfortunates who do not – for whom life might be absurdly skewed in favour of suffering and joyless toil. However, if the question we are asking is if the average or typical human life is skewed this way, I think the answer may well be ‘no’, particularly as we advance into the future and the comforts of modern life are increased while the pains and struggles of the past are (hopefully) eliminated. It may always be arguable that life in general is not worth living, but since there is no obvious and measurable standard of worthwhileness, this seems impossible to prove either way. In my experience however, from my admittedly privileged position in the world, the balance of effort to reward for the majority of people's lives is, if not positively arranged, at least close enough to breaking-even that their lives will have safely escaped labels of triviality. Likewise, Brill concludes:

“we have good reason to believe that defenders of [the triviality argument] have in fact reversed the disproportion between, on the one hand, the effort we exert and bad that befalls us and, on the other, the good we experience or produce. Although not true of all lives, the good in the lives of many people outweighs the bad” (Brill, 2007, p.21).

Thus, the alleged disharmony from which this dangerous absurdity may have arisen will not be present, at least for most of us, and the immortalists’ path to securing their robust or even limited conclusions is once again cut off.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

I began this chapter by considering whether death ‘interrupting’ our life-stories should be seen as spoiling their comprehensibility, and suggested that it does not; firstly, our life-stories can continue on past our deaths, and hence the possibility of reaching closure is not closed off when we die, and secondly, stories can be adequately comprehensible even without reaching complete closure. There was no problem for mortal lives there then.

Next, I examined several arguments which attempted to show that mortality renders our lives incoherent and meaningless by introducing absurdities into them. First, I established that we perceive something as absurd when it involves some extreme discrepancy which we find strange or unexpected, and argued, on that basis, that absurdity itself is a property which only exists relative to particular perspectives. Nevertheless, I suggested that we could still try to assess whether death might necessarily introduce any disharmonies into our lives which would be judged as absurd either by an everyday perspective or, even more worryingly, by *any* perspective we are capable of taking up. Nevertheless, the first few disharmonies I considered (such as the discrepancy between our dignity and the indignity of the grave), did not appear to be serious enough to undermine the entire coherence of our lives, nor to appear absurd from *all* perspectives we could adopt.

A further absurdity – the alleged fact that most mortal beings typically deny or fail to grasp their mortality – was harder to dismiss using the above strategies. However, I suggested that it should be possible to avoid this absurdity simply by developing an authentic conscious attitude towards our deaths. This proposal was complicated by some theorists, such as Ernest Becker, who think it would be impossible to live our lives in full consciousness of death. However, I suggested that it should still be possible provided we simply refuse to dwell on death constantly and perhaps invest some of our concern in people, objects, and causes external to ourselves – and neither of these practices should be seen as dishonest or inauthentic. Indeed, there appear to be mentally-healthy individuals in the world who view their own deaths with a kind of calm and sincere acceptance. Therefore, unless these people are still secretly misleading themselves or others, it appears to be possible for at least *some* of us to conjure up an authentic attitude to mortality.

Finally, I considered the possibility that our lives are rendered absurd because the efforts we expend are not justified by the rewards we secure. This absurdity arises from the discrepancy between the efforts and rewards themselves, and so simply changing our attitudes could not eliminate it. Neither can we easily dismiss it as insubstantial or as only being absurd from certain viewpoints. Nevertheless, I argued that, according to reasonable everyday standards of evaluation, and bearing in mind the value that can be produced from the ‘snowball effect’, paid work, and perhaps even living itself, our existences should probably not be seen as drastically unbalanced in this way. This goes more so for the rich and powerful, unfortunately, but as we progress as a species, we should hope that the standard of living will rise for everyone and pull those other unfortunate individuals out of absurdity.

In summary, there are some kinds of disharmony which death seems to inevitably introduce into our lives (such as the discrepancy between our living capacities and the inertness of a corpse). However, there are perspectives we can take on these disharmonies such that they do not appear absurd or incoherent and, even if they did, it is doubtful as to whether they are serious enough to entirely undermine the coherence of our lives. On the other hand, there are other potential death-related absurdities which would pose this sort of threat, but I demonstrated that they needn’t be seen as inevitable features of mortal lives; it is possible to deny their existence or even actively eliminate them through our own efforts. There may be other death-related disharmonies I have not been able to identify, but none of the ones I have considered entail the conclusion that we must see mortal life as incoherent or meaningless.

Part Three: Conclusion

In Part Three of this thesis, I have attempted to organise and reconstruct the most common arguments given for the claim that mortal life as we know it is meaningless. However, as in Part Two, I have found that none of these arguments are ultimately compelling once we examine them closely enough. First of all, there is no reason to think that our mortal lives cannot be properly purposeful. Although death can interrupt some of our projects, it evidently allows us to accomplish some of our ends and produce some value before it comes. Therefore, all we do is not rendered futile by our mortality. Neither does our mortality trap us, obliviously, in a pointless regress of purely instrumental goals; we have many final ends within life, some small and some weighty.

Furthermore, though the significance of our achievements can be called into doubt if we examine them from distant and temporally wide-ranging perspectives, or evaluate them according to cosmically high thresholds, we have no reason to think these conclusions reflect the undisputable truth of our situation. Equally authoritative are the human-level perspectives and thresholds through which we routinely evaluate our lives as significant. It is true that these significant impacts will disappear from the universe eventually, as will humanity as a whole, but we have also seen that this is not catastrophic for the meaningfulness of our lives. If we make our lives significant and meaningful now, according to the more plausible understandings of space and time, they will be significant and meaningful *eternally*, even if their traces do not endure till the end of the universe.

Finally, though there is much in our lives which may strike us as absurd and incoherent, and various ways that our mortality itself can introduce such absurdities, we have seen no reason to think a mortal life *cannot* be perceived as sufficiently coherent from any perspective or even from an everyday human perspective. The most obvious disharmonies which inevitably arise from death do not appear substantial enough to pose a problem. While the death-related disharmonies which do seem absurd from any angle, and which would totally destroy the coherence of a life if present, do not seem to be necessary features of mortal lives; the absurdity of death-denial can be avoided if we cease to engage in death-denial, and the absurdity of our lives being trivial is arguably absent from most of our actual lives, unless we are very unfortunate.

In summary, as with immortality, we have seen no arguments which compel the conclusion that mortal life must be meaningless. From our normal standpoint, it appears that mortal beings can and do live adequately coherent lives, in which they purposefully pursue and achieve significant goals. To this extent, mortal beings can secure meaningful lives in principle and most people living today likely do, although there is perhaps a large deviation in precisely *how* meaningful those lives are.

9. Summary and lessons learnt

9.1 Outline

In this thesis, I have been examining the veracity of two claims. The first, which I have dubbed the ‘immortalist’ proposition, holds that our mortality renders our lives *meaningless* in all cases, and hence it is only through *immortality* that our lives could potentially be meaningful. The second, which I have dubbed the ‘mortalist’ proposition, holds that the opposite is true: immortality would actually be a meaningless form of existence and thus, if we are capable of having meaningful lives at all, it is due to the fact that we will, at some point, die.

Nevertheless, following an extensive survey of the arguments made by both mortalists and immortalists, I hope to have demonstrated that we have no compelling reason to think either proposition is correct; mortality neither seems to be an essential condition for meaningfulness, nor something inevitably destructive of it. We did see various ways in which both immortality and mortality could interact with meaningfulness and, in some cases, depending on the kind of life under examination, how mortality in particular might even lead to a judgement that the life was meaningless on the whole. Yet, even if the finitude or infinitude of a life could have this effect in *some* instances, my overall conclusion is that they would certainly not necessitate it and, moreover, that there are strategies we could actively adopt to mitigate or avoid the dangers posed in each case. What follows will be a summary of my arguments so far, and the lessons we might draw from them, both with regard to this specific topic and how we might try to make our own lives more meaningful in general.

9.2 My account of meaningfulness

In Part One of this thesis, I defended an amalgam account of meaningfulness wherein I identified the property as being composed of three primary component concepts: purposefulness, significance, and coherence. Each one, I think, might stand as its own kind of meaningfulness. However, I suggested that we could also identify, in some lives, a quality of ‘ideal’ or ‘unequivocal’ meaningfulness which would require all three to some sufficient degree – and this is what I chose to refer to as ‘meaningfulness’ simpliciter for the rest of my thesis. If one were to draw up a formula for meaningfulness based on this theory, it would look something like this:[[145]](#footnote-145)

Meaningfulness = Purposefulness x Significance x Coherence

I then gave several reasons for thinking that each component deserved to be included in my amalgam theory. For instance, I pointed out that each concept aligned with a natural everyday interpretation of terms like ‘meaning’ (i.e. ‘did you *mean* to do that?’, ‘the discovery of penicillin was a *meaningful* event’, and ‘what is the *meaning* of this?’). I also observed how these components fit with our intuitions about which people possessed lives of exemplary meaningfulness (i.e. those who actively worked to successfully solve some significant problem, leaving an intelligible story), and which lives seemed to epitomise meaninglessness (i.e. those which were aimless, insignificant, or incomprehensible/absurd). Moreover, I showed how a loss of religion could also undermine our confidence that our lives possessed each of these three factors, and hence explained why the question of life’s meaningfulness first arose around the time of ‘the death of God’.

If I am right to see meaningfulness as being determined by the presence of these three properties, then this can give us some fairly basic guidelines on how to maximise the meaningfulness in our lives. First, we should try not to lose our sense of purpose; while this does not entail being constantly busy or taking on a hectic amount of work, we should try to make sure we always have some ongoing goals or projects. Moreover, these should be goals which we actually pursue or contribute to in some way; simply having wishes or desires would not make one’s life any more purposeful unless one actually works towards them at least some of the time.

Connecting purposefulness to the next component of meaningfulness, significance, we should also try to pick goals or projects which we have some chance of succeeding at, or at least hold the possibility of producing some side-benefits. Deliberately pursuing one’s goals provides one factor necessary for an (ideally) meaningful life, but one also needs to actually make some kind of an impact through one’s efforts. Exactly how much impact one needs to start counting as ‘significant’, I argued depends on the threshold of the person making the evaluation. Nevertheless, I did also observe that, to get the kind of meaningfulness that most people actually desire, whatever impact we aim for should be positive, obtained through generating value or helping other living things. Although one could potentially have a meaningful life through producing negative effects, as some think Hitler may have, most people would prefer not to possess this kind of meaningfulness (as most people would prefer not to be famous for doing something humiliating, even if fame is something they generally desire).

Finally, I argued that our lives must be coherent to be meaningful. As it transpired, whether a life counts as coherent overall may be somewhat relative to the perspective it is being examined from. Nevertheless, we can still aim to ensure our lives are as coherent as possible according to our own standpoint, or perhaps a generic ‘everyday’ human standpoint which occupies the middle ground between different individuals’ perspectives. Admittedly, some of the ultimate comprehensibility of our lives may be out of our control; if we are born into a society or world which does not follow comprehensible rules, for instance, where demented and incompetent individuals are elevated to positions of power, then our lives themselves, being embedded in this context, are presumably going to come across as that much less intelligible. Nevertheless, there are things we can do to try and maximise the comprehensibility of our lives: we can try to avoid making irrational decisions ourselves, or pursuing futile goals; we can try to sculpt our life into something with a familiar trajectory, rather than jumping from project to project at random or repeating ourselves; and we can try to learn from our past mistakes and experiences, thereby giving them intelligible places in our life-stories.

All in all, if we spend a decent amount of time working *purposefully*, produce *significant* positive results for the world, and thereby leave the material for a *coherent* biography, then our life will likely count as meaningful overall, at least from an ordinary human standpoint. The question of my thesis, however, was whether such a life was truly accessible to either mortal or immortal beings. I will summarise my findings in the following sections. In carrying out this project, I also uncovered additional specifications to be added to my above formula for meaningfulness. Therefore, the next sections will also reiterate these new details and what recommendations we can draw from them.

9.3 Immortality and purposefulness

The first mortalist argument I considered (the motivation argument, 3.2) held that immortal life would be meaningless because it would be empty of purposeful activity, and it would be empty of activity because, lacking death as a deadline, immortal beings would suffer a catastrophic kind of motivational collapse. In response to this argument, I pointed out that immortal lives would still contain many deadlines besides death, and that deadlines are not always necessary for motivation since there exist intrinsically motivating factors as well. Immortal lives might be slightly more lethargic, I acknowledged, but we have no reason to think immortal beings would never get out of bed.

The motivation argument failed then. Nevertheless, there are some insights we can draw from it. First of all, it is correct to say that deadlines can be powerful motivators, even if they aren’t absolutely *necessary* for such motivation. Thus, it may be conducive to meaningfulness in our everyday lives if we maintain an awareness of death as a deadline, since this could give us additional impetus to go out and make something of ourselves, rather than procrastinating and wasting time. On the other hand, I warned that living life *too* urgently could also undermine its overall meaningfulness, for instance, by pushing us to make hasty and unwise decisions or take up inappropriate goals or beliefs. Granting this, a balanced approach may well be best in the end, taking the time to appreciate our lives and learn what we really want before setting our agendas, but bearing in mind that everything we wish to do must be completed before our final, unnegotiable deadline.

The next mortalist argument I considered (the valuation argument, 3.3) held that immortality would again be empty of purposeful activity because, being infinitely long and promising infinitely many experiences, we would cease to value anything within it and thus cease to pursue anything. In response to this argument, I pointed out that finitude, fragility, and scarcity are not strictly required for us to value something and that, even if they were, there would still be enough of all three in immortal lives to inspire valuing (e.g. the finitude of an artwork that will turn to dust, the fragility of a treasured friendship, the scarcity of diamonds etc.). The valuation argument failed as well, therefore. Even combined with the limited success of the motivation argument, the mortalist could only argue that *perhaps* immortal beings would be slightly less motivated and live slightly less passionately than mortal beings typically do. Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that they would cease to act purposefully whatsoever.

Again, however, there were some lessons we can draw from the valuation argument. For instance, if I am correct, then the reason that finitude, fragility, and scarcity can lead us to value something more is simply because an awareness of these factors can lead us to pay closer *attention* to the qualities of that thing, as we know we may not get many more chances to experience it. Granting this, it seems like the biggest worry with regard to our valuing the contents of our lives is not necessarily that they would lose their scarcity, but that we would simply forget to appreciate them. For both mortals and immortals, we should therefore recommend a kind of mindfulness or focus on one’s surroundings, possessions, and relationships, so that their value is fully experienced and our engagement with life is maintained.

The final mortalist argument relating to purposefulness (the boredom argument, 3.4) held that immortal lives would become empty of activity because immortal beings would simply get too *bored* to do anything. However, this argument did not work using any of the three interpretations of ‘boredom’ I examined. To begin with, immortal beings needn’t suffer ‘content boredom’ – running out of projects they are interested in completing – for two reasons: first, because, it could be possible for them to develop new interests and thus find new projects to pursue, and second, because they could find projects or desires which are themselves repeatable or inexhaustible, and thus would never ‘run out’.

Next, I acknowledged that immortal beings may suffer bouts of ‘situational boredom’ – a decrease in interest or enjoyment in their current activities, sometimes brought on by repetitiveness – but argued that this would probably only be a temporary condition, and that it would be more likely to inspire greater purposefulness rather than less, as the immortal being searches for new experiences and more variety. Finally, I also acknowledged that some immortals might suffer from ‘habitual boredom’ – a loss or lack of goals or desires in general – but that this would likely be the result of their prior psychological characteristics and not their infinite life. Furthermore, as with situational boredom, we have no reason to think it could not be overcome, especially with the help of professional therapy or medication.

At best, the above argument shows that immortal beings may have to deal with some kinds of boredom for some of the time. Nevertheless, experiencing some boredom is perfectly compatible with living a meaningful life, as it is for mortals, provided one does not let this boredom wear one down completely and last forever. Yet, as I’ve noted, there is no reason to think immortals would consent to remain cripplingly bored for eternity, as we mortals typically do not consent to remain bored and disengaged from life even for short periods of time. How purposeful we are can sometimes be affected by factors outside of our control, such as our predisposition to experience habitual boredom, but we can make efforts to fight against these predispositions.

9.4 Immortality and significance

In this chapter, I examined arguments which held that immortal beings could not accomplish achievements of sufficient significance to render their lives meaningful. Here, I quickly rejected ungrounded speculations that immortal beings would not *care* to perform virtuous actions because of a lack of compassion. However, I did consider in more detail the charge that immortal beings wouldn’t have the *opportunity* to perform various sorts of significant virtuous actions (the virtue argument, 4.1), since death was (allegedly) a necessary condition for acts of bravery, justice, and love to hold their significance. In response to this, I pointed out that immortals would still have much to lose and sacrifice besides their lives (such as their work, relationships, skills, reputation etc.) and so these virtues would retain most of their significant content. Moreover, I noted the existence of many significant achievements relating to other virtues, such as intellectual curiosity, humour, and creativity. In short, immortal beings would still have plenty of opportunities to perform virtuous and significant actions.

The next argument I considered (the challenge argument, 4.2) held that immortal life would be meaningless because only completing *challenging* projects can produce the sort of significance required for meaningfulness, and nothing an immortal could do would be challenging since they would have infinite time to work on it. The inclusion of some kind of challenge condition seemed reasonable to me. However, in response to this argument, I pointed out several things: that even achievements produced by ‘mere diligence’ can still be challenging; that immortal beings may choose to produce some things the challenging way, even if a ‘mere diligence’ option is open to them; and that in many if not most cases, a ‘mere diligence’ option will *not* be open to them, as immortal lives will still exist in contexts with physical and social limitations on how many attempts one gets to do most things.

Granting my objections, it seems immortal lives would still involve many forms of challenge, as well as many opportunities for significant virtuous achievements. Both of these arguments were based on the notion that limitations are necessary for our actions to have significance and for our lives to have meaningfulness, and this is a lesson I agree with wholeheartedly; an all-powerful being, who could get anything they wanted at the click of a finger, may not be able to live a significant or meaningful life. Nevertheless, I observed that immortal lives would not be empty of limitations, and the particular limitations they are free from compared to mortal lives (those surrounding death and infirmity) may in fact put immortals in a *stronger* position with regard to achieving significant things, since they no longer have to focus on the toil of self-preservation.

Applying this to our own society, we can see that making things *too* easy for ourselves might backfire with regard to the meaningfulness of our lives, but that many of the strides we are currently making (or hope to make), for instance, towards healthier populations who have to work less, would still be taking us in the right direction – making it easier to achieve significant and meaningful things, not harder. Moreover, to maximise the significance of our lives on a personal level, we should also aim to take on projects which embody this sweet-spot: those which we have a decent chance of completing but will not be so easy that we avoid any obstacles or challenge whatsoever.

Next, I considered various forms of uniqueness arguments (4.3). Initially, I resisted claims that one’s life could only be significant or meaningful if it possessed a kind of ‘meaning’ distinct from everyone else’s, or if it stood out against some average score; significance and meaningfulness, I argued, are better understood as more absolute measures of a life. However, there were some reasons for thinking that, the more irreplaceable one’s contribution to the world, the more significant it would be, and that immortal beings would not be all that unique with regard to their skills and life experiences. Nevertheless, I argued that, even if uniqueness does play some role in determining the significance of our achievements, the mere fact that someone else could or would have done what one actually did is clearly an insufficient ground for claiming that one’s achievements were *totally* insignificant. It is significant and meaningful to save a person’s life, even if someone else might have saved the life had you stayed in bed.

Still, one take-away from this discussion is indeed that, if we want to maximise the significance or meaningfulness of our lives, doing things which could not or would not have been done without us seem to be better choices than things for which our contribution would be replaceable, all things considered.[[146]](#footnote-146) And this may be part of the explanation of why personal relationships can be so meaningful for us; there is a real sense in which *our* contribution to our romantic and platonic relationships could not be made by anyone else. One way to try and follow this advice would be to work on projects which would be too difficult for others, but which one is ideally situated to work on, for instance, because of one’s past life-experiences, training, or capacities.

Finally, I considered the argument that immortal lives would become insignificant because they would simply reach a point where there were no more significant things to do (4.4). After much discussion, I believe that this prediction is plausible: significant achievements can be understood as the overcoming of significant obstacles, but given enough time and work, there may be no more significant obstacles left. Nevertheless, I did not agree that reaching this point would leave immortal lives insignificant. This complaint, I argued, was based on an incorrect understanding of how significance is calculated – treating it as a measure of significance over lifespan, where it would be better understood, again, as a more absolute measure of a life’s impact. Einstein’s life did not become less significant because he stopped producing significant achievements after 30, neither would its significance disappear even if he lived on forever. Despite it being possible that immortals would run out of significant things to do, therefore, it does not follow that all their lives would *be* insignificant, provided they had managed to secure a sufficient number of significant achievements before that point (and, given the time on their hands, it is likely they would have thousands).

Like the virtue and challenge arguments, there also is a lesson to be learned here which might seem somewhat paradoxical: if we keep achieving significant things, overcoming problems, and making the world better, eventually we could be left with a world which, despite being utopic, would provide no further opportunity for significance. Again, we need problems and limitations for our achievements to be significant, but each significant thing we do seems to reduce the number of problems and limitations in the world. Beings *born* into utopias would therefore appear to be ‘cursed’ with problem-free and thus insignificant lives. The only way out would be if overcoming self-created problems and struggles could count as significant achievements. This seems plausible, I argued, if we think of conquering Mount Everest, or winning a major sporting event. Nevertheless, for infinitely long-lived beings, who would eventually repeat every struggle and victory exactly the same, the problem of running out of significant achievements could arise anew. It is thus lucky, for immortal beings, that the significant achievements they secure early on in their lives can rest on their metaphorical mantle for all time.

9.5 Immortality and coherence

In the final chapter of Part Two, I proposed that one way of evaluating the coherence of a person’s life was to examine the comprehensibility of their life-story – the hypothetical narrative which could be told about their lives. I then examined several arguments which held that immortal beings would not be able to have comprehensible life-stories. In the first case, I considered the argument that immortals’ life-stories could not be comprehensible because, being infinitely long, the narrative meaning of any event in their lives would always be open to revision (the revisability argument, 5.2). Nevertheless, I argued this would not pose a problem for the comprehensibility of their life-stories so far. Although the narrative meaning of the events could change as future plot twists came to light, this does not mean that our understanding of the events would have previously been inadequate; we can understand an event perfectly well, even if certain facts about it will change in the future.

Next, I considered the argument that immortal lives would be inadequately comprehensible overall because they would necessarily be lacking an ending (the closure argument, 5.3). Here, I argued that the most plausible interpretation of ‘ending’ was that of ‘narrative closure’, defined as the point in a story at which all presiding questions raised by the narrative had been answered. It is possible to see how a story lacking any narrative closure could negatively impact its comprehensibility. However, I argued that reaching narrative closure in one’s life is something open to both mortals and immortals, even if the latter continue living forever. Such closure, if it is indeed necessary for adequate comprehensibility (which I doubted), could be maintained by an immortal provided their lives reached a relatively stable state akin to a fairy-tale’s ‘happy ever after’, or the Christian conception of heaven. Alternatively, if their lives never reach this point, closure could still be achieved again and again for different *chapters* of their lives, giving each life the structure of a *series* of novels rather than just one, but still providing closure throughout.

Finally, I considered the argument that immortal life-stories would be shapeless overall and that would render them inadequately comprehensible (the shapelessness argument, 5.4). In the first case, this was allegedly because they would never be complete, and so their overall shape could never be comprehended. However, I argued that their shape *so far* could be comprehended, and that should be enough to consider them comprehensible overall. Then it was objected that even this would be impossible (soon enough) since immortal lives would end up involving so many twists and turns and so much content that their *overall* plot would be cognitively ungraspable. Nevertheless, again, I argued that this does not necessarily imply anything negative about the comprehensibility of the life-story itself; we can understand entire books and novels perfectly well without being able to sum up what they were ‘about’ in one neat sentence. Similarly, a life-story can be perfectly comprehensible even if it involves so much that one cannot grasp or summarise its overall shape.

In conclusion, there are reasons for thinking that mortal lives would be comprehensible in certain *ways* that immortal lives would not be: i.e. we could comprehend them as *complete wholes* in a way that was more or less *fixed* (or at least, more fixed than an immortal’s life-story would be). Yet, we have no reason for thinking that these kinds of comprehensibility are necessary for the life itself to be considered coherent or meaningful. Though it might be harder to sum up what ‘the’ overall meaning of an immortal’s life was, we should not think this means the life itself was not meaningful. In fact, as I’ve suggested, our inability to summarise ‘the’ meaning of an immortal’s life will likely be because it is so brimming with meaningful projects and achievements that nothing can be singled out, as it can for more limited mortal lives.

The overall lesson to be drawn from this chapter is thus that, although we might typically desire or expect our lives to have some overall plot which is easily graspable, all at once, and which will not be overturned in any way, this may only be a result of our present lives being so short, rather than some necessary or constitutive condition for a life being meaningful at all. For a mortal human, being unable to say anything in response to the question ‘what was the meaning of x’s life?’ might usually be taken to imply that the individual had done nothing worth commenting on. Nevertheless, for an immortal being, it is likely that the opposite would be true; that they had done *so much* worth commenting on, it was impossible to sum it all up.

Furthermore, our own expectations that our lives or life-stories will be neatly wrapped up at the point of our deaths are perhaps overconfident. Just because death terminates our lives does not mean that it will grant them narrative closure, and neither will it prevent any of the narrative meaning in our lives being overturned by future events. Thus, when living mortal lives, we have to be content with the awareness that our life-stories too will likely be ongoing even after we pass away and will probably not reach any semblance of closure or determinateness until long after that. Again then, the coherence of our lives is probably best understood as an ongoing thing – as a way of evaluating how much sense the life makes in particular chapters of activity or just ‘so far’. In its most direct and primary application therefore, the coherence of a life will not be greatly affected by whether the life is finite or infinite.

Having now recapitulated Part Two of my thesis, my conclusion with regard to the mortalist position should be clear: while there do appear to be some forces which *may* render immortal lives *somewhat less* purposeful, significant, or coherent overall – and hence somewhat less meaningful – we have no reason to think that any of these forces would produce anything more than minor effects. Immortal beings may or may not struggle a little more to find motivation or passion or opportunities to bank significant achievements, but they will still have and actively pursue their goals, and reach significant victories, and they will continue to do so for many thousands of years until, most likely, the significant problems of the world are solved, and they move on to repeatable pleasures, socialising, sports, and overcoming self-set challenges. At such a point I believe their life-stories would reach some semblance of narrative closure and, even though they would never technically be finished or graspable as wholes, they could be perfectly comprehensible throughout. Thus, such lives would possess all the factors necessary for ideal meaningfulness. Of course, it is possible that certain immortal beings may lack meaningful lives if they are, for instance, exceptionally lazy, irrational, or unable to achieve anything of significant value, but this would not be the fault of their immortality. In theory, lives can remain meaningful even if they are endless.

9.6 Mortality and purposefulness

The first set of immortalist arguments I considered revolved around the claim that mortal life could not be *purposeful* in the right way to be meaningful. Nonetheless, though mortality can demotivate us sometimes (perhaps due to an awareness of some of the other immortalist arguments I considered in the rest of Part Three), it is evidently not incompatible with our living activity-filled lives. The arguments in this section were thus aimed at showing that, though mortal beings can have lives full of intentional pursuits, this activity does not count as properly purposeful because it is either ultimately pointless or futile.

In the first case, the justification for this claim was that we allegedly spend all of our time working towards nothing other than self-preservation, with no ultimate point to life as a whole (the supermarket regress, 6.2). My response to this ‘supermarket regress’ argument was essentially to point out that its vision of human life was wrong; much of what we do is not justified on some endless regress of instrumental reasons, but is in fact aimed at final ends, such as the time we spend with our friends, working on hobbies, or doing anything else for pleasure.

The fairly obvious message to take away from this discussion is thus that mortal life needn’t be pointless overall, but that it will be unless we actually find something to live for. If we merely go through our daily lives for the sake of perpetuating those lives, then life will indeed be pointless and meaningless, but provided we adopt some goals which that effort can contribute to, we will avoid this meaninglessness. Nonetheless, another important observation made in this discussion was that these final goals needn’t be external to what we would consider ‘work’; if one enjoys one’s career or daily chores, such as cleaning the house or washing up, then they can stand as their own ends in a perfectly legitimate sense. One’s life will thus have a point (though not a very significant one), provided one merely desires or appreciates the various tasks that go into the living of it.

The next argument I considered held that the seeming purposefulness of our lives could be undermined and rendered futile if our projects were interrupted by death and prevented from bearing fruit (the interruption argument, 6.3). Here I acknowledged that death can harmfully interrupt our activities and render them futile in some cases. However, I rejected the argument overall given that many of our projects will be completed before death, and thus safe from its interruption, and for those which aren’t, there are still many reasons they might avoid complete futility: they might be completable by someone else after our death, they might have produced benefits besides their intended goal, and they might have been worth doing for their own sake, as hobbies are if one enjoys them.

One potential lesson to stress here could be that we should be cognisant of death and try to wind down our projects and ambitions to limit the amount of work which our deaths could render futile. However, this ‘thanatization’, as some authors have called it, would often be a more harmful cure than the disease; since we do not know when death might arrive, completely thanatizing our lives would mean living essentially purposelessly. Thus, the best way to maximise meaningfulness here is still to work as hard as one is comfortable doing, but with the awareness that death may interrupt some of one’s projects, and so preparing as much as possible for that eventuality (e.g. leaving instructions for one’s successors to carry on one’s work).

I then considered another version of this argument which held that death may still render all our efforts futile, even if we finish some projects before it comes, because all our life’s work is wrapped up in a single overarching project and it is this meta-project which death necessarily interrupts. Nevertheless, I argued that no matter how we understand this meta-project, it is not true that death will always render it futile; if it is completable, then it can be completed, in theory, before we die, and if it is not completable, then it must be worth doing for its own sake, in which case our efforts could never be entirely futile because they would already have been their own reward. Furthermore, I argued that it was implausible to suggest that the value of our efforts could be entirely wrapped up in some overarching project; regardless of whether there is such a project, much of what we do (e.g. saving a life, going on holiday) succeeds in bearing its own specific vindicating value, and so is not just worth doing in so much as it contributes to something like our journey of self-development.

A final brief lesson from this chapter is that not all kinds of purposeful-seeming activity counts towards meaningfulness. We must thus make sure that the activity which fills up our lives is actually aimed at some final ends, and that these ends are something we are capable of accomplishing (i.e. our efforts are neither pointless nor futile).

9.7 Mortality and significance

The first argument I considered in this chapter (the impact argument, 7.1) held that mortal life was insignificant, not because we are short-lived relative to the universe, but because this short-lived-ness limits our ability to make any kind of considerable impact. This insignificance was apparently revealed to many pessimistic philosophers when reflecting on our lives from a cosmically distant and temporally wide-ranging perspective known as ‘sub specie aeternitatis’. My counter to this argument, along with several others, was that although this perspective and threshold for evaluating the significance of a life does exist, we have no positive reason to take it up. In fact, the more natural human-level perspective from which we normally evaluate the significance of our lives can be seen as equally ‘correct’ and ‘authoritative’ and, similarly, we may legitimately use our human-level thresholds for impact to judge our own human-level contributions as significant.

While it may be that our lives naturally appear insignificant when taking up distant perspectives or challenging standards, there are no objective perspectives or standards here. Thus, it is essentially up to us to determine what we consider to be ‘enough’ valuable consequences for a life to count as significant. If we choose to adopt the SSA perspective and its associated standards, then our present mortal lives may indeed appear to be insignificant and meaningless until we either achieve immortality or some other method of increasing our power to make an impact. Nevertheless, the point which needs to be stressed is that there is nothing necessitating we employ such perspectives or standards, and so no grounds upon which to argue that mortal lives *are* insignificant or meaningless simpliciter. From one perspective this appears true, but from other equally legitimate, and arguably more useful and relevant perspectives, it appears false.

The next immortalist argument I considered (the permanence argument, 7.2) held that mortality renders our lives insignificant and meaningless, not because it prevents us doing enough to register as significant, but because it negates the significance our actions actually attained by wiping out the human species from the universe (sooner or later). This argument appeared to be motivated by the intuition that, the longer something lasts, the more valuable it is, which seems to be true in many cases. Nevertheless, the premise employed here is even stronger: that nothing can have any value or significance except that which has *permanently* valuable effects. If this premise is true, then the eventual disappearance of humanity from the universe, which would be avoided by our immortality, may indeed entail our actions will be rendered valueless and insignificant. However, I pointed out that this premise clashes with another which seems equally plausible: that something can hold value even if its effects disappear at some point. For instance, it can be valuable to save a baby from a burning building, even if that baby will inevitably die many decades later.

The solution here, I argued, was to note what other assumptions might be fuelling these clashing intuitions. Specifically, I argued that they are each inspired by conflicting perspectives on the metaphysics of *time*. The intuition that only permanent effects could hold value I suggested was motivated by a presentist view of time, which holds that anything past is no longer real. Whilst the intuition that even transient things could retain their value I suggested was motivated by a four-dimensionalist view of time, which holds that the past and future are just as real as the present. The latter stance, I argued, is better aligned with modern physics, and avoids many problems associated with presentism. Moreover, as several theorists have noted, thinking about life from a four-dimensionalist perspective can banish many of our worries relating to mortality and impermanence. In summary, although the effects of our actions, our own lives, and even our species may one day disappear, we needn’t conclude that none of it was real or none of it mattered; according to four-dimensionalism, what we did is recorded forever in history, in one sense, and so its value and significance is eternally preserved.

9.8 Mortality and coherence

This chapter focused on the charge that human life could not be meaningful because there is something about mortality which makes it inadequately coherent overall. First, I dismissed worries that mortal lives are incoherent because their life-stories are interrupted by death; death neither necessarily interrupts a person’s life-story, nor would such an interruption entirely undermine the coherence of their life.

Next, I considered several arguments that held mortal life was incoherent because death introduces some kind of *absurdity* into our lives, where ‘absurdity’ was understood to be something we perceive in situations which involve some extreme discrepancy or disharmony that we find unexpected or incongruous. Given individuals have different expectations, however, this meant that absurdity, and hence coherence, can only be identified relative to certain perspectives. Nevertheless, I argued that we could reject a robust interpretation of the immortalists’ claim here if we could show that there exists at least one accessible perspective which would not perceive mortal life as absurd, and a more limited interpretation of the immortalists’ claim if we could also show that mortal life would not be perceived as absurd from a kind of ‘everyday’ human standpoint.

The first few death-related disharmonies I considered, such as the disharmony between our dignity and the indignity of the grave, might be perceived as absurd from this everyday perspective. Yet, I argued that they would not be perceived that way from other perspectives and, even if one accepted they were absurd, they were not substantial enough to undermine the coherence of our lives entirely. Next, I considered two more serious disharmonies which, arguably, could not be dismissed in the same way: the discrepancy between our reality as mortals and the alleged fact that none of us *truly* grasp that we will die (the inauthenticity argument, 8.4.1), and the discrepancy between the effort and suffering that mortal life involves and the reward that we get out of it (the triviality argument, 8.4.2).[[147]](#footnote-147)

In the former case, I argued that we might be able to eliminate this absurdity by simply *becoming* consciously aware of our mortality. Nevertheless, if certain theorists are to be believed, then this would be an impossible task since death itself is just too frightening for us to face head on; we have no choice but to delude ourselves into thinking we are immortal in various literal and metaphorical ways. I rejected this claim, however. In fact, I think it is possible to develop a realistic and authentic grasp of one’s mortality, even if it is frightening. My two suggestions for making this process easier were, firstly, to divest some of one’s self-concern into other things, such as one’s friends, projects, causes etc. so that when one’s own death comes, it could not destroy all one cared about, and secondly, to simply put death to the back of one’s mind in one’s daily life. This later strategy, I suggested, should not be seen as dishonest or deceptive, however; provided one is not lying to oneself about whether one is actually mortal, one can live one’s life without crippling death-anxiety simply by focusing on the living of life, rather than what will come afterwards.

The upshot of this discussion is that, if it is possible, we should try to eliminate absurdities from our lives when we discover them, because the more absurdities one perceives in a life, the less likely one will perceive it as coherent and meaningful overall. With specific reference to death, we mortal beings should try to come to terms with our mortality and all it means for us so that our beliefs and aspirations won’t be disharmonious with reality. A blunt and truthful grasp of mortality might be difficult to acquire, but it is worth acquiring and, once we have it, we are permitted to put it safely to the backs of our minds, rather than ruining our lives by perpetually dwelling on it.

The final disharmony I considered was the allegation that our lives’ efforts are trivial, i.e. the hardships and struggles of our lives are not worth the value that they produce. This was then blamed on death in as much as the fragility caused by our mortality is the main reason we have to work so much, and also one of the main causes of our suffering. This charge was fairly difficult to adjudicate on, since there do not appear to be any obvious ways to precisely measure the balance of value and suffering in a life. What we can say in defence of mortal life, however, is that there are lots of valuable effects which arise from our actions which we might not always be aware of, and lots of value in our lives which we often take for granted. According to a reasonable standard for evaluating a life’s worthwhileness, therefore, many mortal beings may pass.

In short, mortality does not *necessitate* we see our lives are as absurdly trivial. Nevertheless, there will likely be many who fail even against fairly low thresholds, particularly those who were born into poverty or other challenging circumstances, since their lives will likely involve relatively high levels of work and suffering, and low levels of reward. This gives us all the more reason to help such individuals, however; not only do their struggles impact upon their happiness, but also their chance at having a coherent and meaningful life. The final lesson to be learned here is another relatively obvious one, which should not require much convincing: that we should strive to gain a reasonable work/life balance, and a reasonable ratio of efforts to value produced.

My conclusions regarding the immortalist position should now also be clear: there is no reason we must necessarily see mortal lives as meaningless. Although there are some ways in which mortality could negatively affect the meaningfulness of our lives, for instance through interrupting some of our projects and making them futile, or by forcing us to spend large amounts of time on joyless labour for the purpose of self-preservation, again, neither of these effects are strong enough to render our lives meaningless on the whole, at least for the vast majority of people. Equally, there are some ways in which mortality might introduce disharmonies into our lives, but it is possible to take up perspectives from which these disharmonies do not appear absurd in many cases, and for the cases I have considered where this is less plausible, I have shown that we can either object to the initial claim (e.g. that life is trivial) or eliminate the underlying disharmony by changing our attitudes.

Finally, there are ways in which the significance and meaningfulness of our lives can be drawn into question by our taking up various standpoints (such as the sub specie aeternitatis perspective) or background assumptions (such as presentism about time). Yet, in each case we have no good reason to see those standpoints or assumptions as authoritative or leading to the ‘correct’ conclusions about mortal life and thus, again, we may permissibly adopt standards and assumptions that generate less bleak evaluations. Granting this, while many of these visions or arguments may be successful, on occasion, at robbing our motivation to press on with life, we can see that death need not necessitate any negative conclusions here; the arguments which make objective claims can be proved wrong or their consequences avoided, and the arguments which make claims reliant on particular unjustified assumptions or standpoints can be ignored.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In summary, I have examined an extensive set of arguments for both the mortalist and immortalist positions and found none of them to be persuasive. Consequently, we have no compelling reason to accept either the claim that mortality is entirely incompatible with meaningfulness, nor that it is an essential condition for it. We have seen many ways in which our deaths or their absence might interact with the meaningfulness of our lives, but no way in which this issue would *necessarily* determine the result one way or the other, at least when we are examining those lives from our everyday human standpoint. In other words, from the sphere within which evaluations of meaningfulness typically take place, immortal lives can count as meaningful or meaningless depending on their specific contents, and so can mortal lives.

Whether immortality is actually something to be desired *in general* is unclear, however. We have seen that, absent the possibility of death, many things would be different. Some changes would be good, such as the freedom to step away from the ‘supermarket regress’, the ability to start taking on longer-lasting projects, and the removal of the pressure that comes from knowing we only get one short chance at living. While other changes might be less attractive (at least at first), such as the weakening of our distinct identities, or the possible eventual loss of opportunities for significant work. Nevertheless, one thing immortal beings won’t lose is the capacity to lead meaningful lives.[[148]](#footnote-148) Those opposed to immortality or radical life-extension must therefore find some other argumentative strategy with which to reach their conclusion.

Similarly, whether death is something to be afraid of or grieve about *in general* has not been determined either. We do know that it will be the end of our own subjective world, and that it might interrupt many of the projects and ongoing activities with which we had filled our time. We also know that it will prevent us from doing more with our lives, experiencing all there is to experience and being all that we could have been. We know that this termination is inevitable and permanent. We also know that it *already* affects our lives, in as much as we consciously curtail the ambitiousness our aspirations and are forced to do much busywork merely to postpone its arrival. Yet, again, one thing we can conclude fairly securely is that it does not necessarily prevent our lives from being meaningful now and will not destroy this meaningfulness when it arrives. Along with our births, it provides the space within which we must live, but we have the freedom to fill that space with meaningful experiences, relationships, and achievements – and once we have done so, death cannot negate that fact.

Granting that immortality could be meaningful for us, but also that mortality can be too, it seems our best strategy for maximising the meaningfulness of our lives needn’t be to strive for eternal life, nor turn down an immortality elixir if it were discovered. Rather we should focus instead on the components or properties of our lives which are more directly relevant to meaningfulness, namely: that we live actively and purposefully in pursuit of non-futile, final ends; that we achieve things of significant impact, particularly those with valuable consequences for human life, and which involve challenging pursuits for which our skills and experiences make us more irreplaceable; and that we endeavour to avoid absurdities or incongruencies in our lives by trying to find an environment we can fit into intelligibly, make rational decisions based on appropriate ideals and beliefs, and shape our lives into stable, comprehensible, and worthwhile stories where the future follows from the past in a coherent trajectory.[[149]](#footnote-149) This may involve us being mindful of the deadlines in our world, as well as the fragility and scarcity in objects around us, and will require us to overcome difficult obstacles, rather than avoiding them, to make conscious decisions about the final goals of our lives, and develop appropriate attitudes and expectations about them. Yet, none of what I have said rules out either mortal or immortal beings; both can address themselves to these recommendations fully, and both can obtain meaningful lives.

Word Count (body): 108,684

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1. And perhaps a few within the profession too. See Tartaglia (2016) for one example. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to O’Brien (2017), the first recorded use of ‘the meaning of life’ in its modern sense can be found in Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* II. ix., with the term ‘meaningful’ appearing sometime later in 1852. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The view that life can only have meaning if certain – typically religious – supernatural beliefs are true has come to be known as ‘supernaturalism’ in the literature (Seachris, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A quick internet search provided thousands of hits and titles such as: ‘The Chemistry of Connection: Five Keys to a Richer, Happier, Fulfilling and Meaningful Life’, ‘Minimalism: Live a Meaningful Life’, ‘The Life Plan: Simple Strategies for a Meaningful Life’, ‘Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life’, ‘The Meaningful Life: How to Live the Life you Love and Love the Life you Live: A Six Step Programme’, ‘Flat Belly for Life Revisited: A Holistic Guide to Living a Healthy Meaningful Life into Your 100s’ etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For instance, Singer (1992), Eagleton (2008), Baggini (2005), Thomson (2003), Klemke and Cahn (2008), Benatar (2004), Metz (2013), etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Tartaglia (2015) for a critique of this common practice. Occasionally some choose to discuss the ‘bigger’ question though, for example, Seachris (2009) and Cottingham (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g. Schinkel, De Ruyter, and Aviram (2015. P.4) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alternatively, what gives all life meaning could simply be the conglomeration of what gives meaning to each individual life. For an example of a debate which touches on this question, see Trisel (2017) and Tartaglia (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In fact, things may be even more confusing if I am correct in thinking that to say a life simply ‘has meaning’ could be understood as saying *either* that their life has *a* meaning, *or* that it possesses some *meaningfulness*, which I’m suggesting are two different concepts. To avoid confusion, I will thus strive to use the term ‘meaning’ only to talk about meaning-having and never meaningfulness from now on. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Unlike perhaps individuals with more significant achievements, such as Abraham Lincoln, for whom freeing the slaves could reasonably be considered both *the* meaning of his life and something that made his life *meaningful*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. E.g. Metz (2013, p.6). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. However, even granting this and that human life in general does have a meaning, arguably, it still might be possible to end up with a meaningless life, if one neglects to relate to or promote that meaning in the right way. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For instance, even if human life turns out not to have any grand *meaning*, they believe it should still be possible for individuals to find some *meaningfulness* in their lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Neither is it to examine whether an individual person’s death might impact upon whether their individual life has a meaning or what it is, so I will leave it open as to how this question is related to the one about meaningfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. An interesting observation, but not something I will discuss in depth here, is that many of the immortalist arguments I will consider later – which hold that immortality is necessary for life to be meaningful – could also be interpreted as supernaturalist arguments if we assume that true immortality is only possible if some with some kind of supernatural afterlife. In fact, Craig (1994), for one, explicitly asserts that an eternal God-given afterlife is another requirement for life to avoid absurdity and meaninglessness. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Evers and van Smeden argue the same but substitute a notion of ‘valuation’ for subjective attraction (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Affolter responds to this kind of objection by stressing that the only purposes which count towards meaningfulness are those which are ‘contained within us’ in some sense, such that we can only understand human nature when we understand the goal we are meant to fulfil (2007, p.449). I’m not certain this avoids all potential counter-examples though. For instance, say we were meant to provide entertainment to aliens with all our loving and fighting, would this not illuminate human nature and why we feel and act the ways we do? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is the standard complaint against subjectivist accounts. For a thorough list of the examples of dull and occasionally revolting activities given in the literature, see Metz (2013, p.175). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I mention the uniqueness of their DNA here because Bramble, for one, argues that one’s contributions to the world must be irreplaceable in order to count towards meaningfulness. I discuss this condition further in 4.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. He distinguishes these two descriptions as his *conception* of meaningfulness and his *concept* of meaningfulness (2012, p.352). See Metz (2013) for another example of this distinction being made using these terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For a more in-depth discussion of fitting attitudes, see Kauppinen (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Even for the subjectivist theories which I have rejected, we can connect their inherent characterisation of meaningfulness as fulfilment or love to an everyday use of the term: e.g. ‘this object *means* a lot to me.’ Unlike Kauppinen’s, my own theory does not fall at this hurdle, as we shall see. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Martela (2017) also objects to Kauppinen’s fitting attitude analysis of meaningfulness on the grounds that he sees no good reason that the attitudes Kauppinen highlights (e.g. pride and fulfilment) are collected together under the label ‘meaningfulness’. If there was some rationale explaining their unification, Martela wonders why Kauppinen did not offer it (p.238). As it is, Martela is right to suggest that Kauppinen’s list of attitudes is itself somewhat arbitrary seeming. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Metz (2013, p.34), Nozick (2001, p.594), and Fischer (2005, p.379) also offer their own different characterisations of meaningfulness along these lines (respectively, a kind of family-resemblance concept, something brought about by transcending limits, and the value of creative self-expression) but I believe their attempts all fail for similar reasons to Kauppinen’s, although I don’t have the room to discuss them here. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Interestingly identifying meaningfulness with one or more of these concepts is not uncommon in the field of psychology. See Martela and Steger (2016) for an example theory using precisely these three terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, O’Brien (2017) notes that the question of the meaning of life is sometimes about “the point, aim, object, purpose, end, or goal of life, typically one’s own.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thomson, in his discussion of the ‘hermeneutic’ meaning of a life, also talks about how an action can have a meaning in terms of having an intention or purpose (2003, p.140). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. It is worth noting that significance we are personally responsible for, which we might call our *achievements*, seems to be more meaningful than significance we are not responsible for. However, this effect can be at least partly explained when we remember that purposefulness is also one of the three factors which generate meaningfulness. An achievement will thus be more meaningful than some accidentally-caused significance because it involved both significance and deliberate, purposeful activity. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For example, O’Brien (2017) writes that sometimes “the question of the meaning of life is that of whether our lives, and anything we do within them, matter, or have any sort of importance.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For example, Kekes (2000, p.30), Baggini (2005, p.175), and Wong (2008, p.142) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Since we would probably agree that a person acting incoherently or pursuing nonsensical goals is not behaving purposefully in the right sense for meaningfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. There is a discussion to be had here about what counts as within a person’s life and what is outside of it, but nothing in my following chapters will rest on this distinction, so it is safe for me to put it aside here. A more pertinent question is exactly how to determine the comprehensibility of a life; e.g. is this supposedly an objective quality or is it tied to a particular observer, what are the observer’s qualities etc.? This is a question that will find its answer as my project progresses, specifically in Chapters 5 and 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For instance, Camus (1942a) and Nagel (1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For instance, Metz (2013, p.6) and Brill (2007, p.6). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Such as Audi (2005, p.333), Cottingham (2003, p.22), White (2009, p.425), and Veal (2017, p.251-2). Additionally, although his project is ultimately different to mine, Wrathall and Murphey (2013, p.2) interpret Heidegger’s (1962) analysis of the meaning (Sinn) of our existence as being about what sense we can make of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Further examples include Juhl and Routledge who write that “meaning can refer to feelings that the world outside of the self makes sense” (2013, p.220), and Stillman and Lambert who report that “By meaning of life... people typically intend not a dictionary definition of life – but rather a way to make sense of their existence” (2013, p.306). For many more examples see Hicks and Routledge (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Interestingly, the conceptual relationship between meaningfulness and coherence or sense is not just a quirk of English but appears in other languages as well. For instance, one can translate ‘the meaning of life’ as alternatively, ‘el sentido de la vida’ (Spanish), ‘le sens de la vie’ (French), ‘der Sinn des Lebens’ (German), or ‘il senso della vita’ (Italian), and in each case the concept of ‘sense’ is right at the forefront of each translation of the term signifying ‘meaning’. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For instance, in Chapter 4, I will accept that some degree of *challenge* in reaching a goal can make that achievement more significant in the way relevant to meaningfulness. I will attempt to draw additions such as these together in my summary at the end of Chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Or at least falling short of achieving that kind of *ideal* meaningfulness outlined above. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Compare this to Kauppinen’s characterisation of the meaning of meaningfulness, whereby the same complaint would indicate instead that I wish I had done more to be fulfilled by and proud of. This interpretation is not very far from the truth, but it does not seem as fitting as the analysis my amalgam theory gives. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The very fact that the wide-ranging mortalist and immortalist arguments can all be connected to meaningfulness via their effect on one of these three components is further evidence that meaningfulness is indeed composed as I have suggested. Almost all other m-theories (barring perhaps Kauppinen’s) would struggle to show why some of the mortalist and immortalist arguments are indeed relevant to meaningfulness. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. This example comes from Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014, p.364). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. This example too comes from Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014, p.364). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. And as Mike Perry points out, scientific theories such as this are always open to adaptation or even elimination as new evidence comes to light (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Naturally we can imagine this change would alter society in drastic ways, but the important thing is that the immortal creatures in that society will still be *human beings* in all ways except for their mortality. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. In a similar way, I will also be ignoring other practical problems with immortality such as overcrowding. Again, if such an eventuality would render our lives meaningless, then that would be interesting, but since it wouldn’t be a necessary or direct effect of our deathlessness (but rather deathlessness combined with a growing population on a finite planet), it is not what my thesis is aimed at examining. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Something like the motivation argument as I present it can be found in, for example, Frankl (1957), Cave (2012), James (2009), and Noonan (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This example comes from Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin (2014, p.367). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Even this claim would be wrong though, as I’ve argued above, because there *are* in fact many deadline-like forms of temporal scarcity in immortal life and so there *would* be many chances to miss out on certain activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Similarly, Seana Valentine Shiffrin also asserts that the temporariness of life “supplies a bracing reason to organize a life around a particular set of values, making one distinctive individual and prodding one to get on with it” (2013, p.145). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Something like this worry can also be read in Cave (2012, p.285), Noonan (2013, p.16), Eagleton (2008, p.91), Nussbaum (1994, p.225-226), and Scheffler (2013, p.99). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Similarly, in Scarre's discussion of the motivation argument, he states that if we were immortal there would be “no reason to value our time, since anything we could do today might safely be deferred indefinitely” (2007, p.55). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. We saw another argument in this vein in the previous section (though it was ultimately unsuccessful), when Cave and Noonan argued that we could not evaluate things (and thereby value them) without the deadline of death forcing us to reflect on our priorities and rankings of things we care about. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Although later on she changed her mind (1999, p.812). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Jeff Noonan’s comments seems to get closer to the version of the valuation argument outlined here. For instance, he argues that, of the contents of our lives, “death… is a frame which allows people to experience their scarcity, and thus to value them” (2013, p.18). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. The observation that many people don’t seem that conscious of their mortality can be seen as problematic for the motivation argument as well. As Trisel summarises: “If it is correct, as I believe, that most people do live under the illusion of immortality, then our finitude will not serve to motivate them” (2015, p.64). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. For instance, Heidegger claims that the common man is inauthentic in his relation to death, in that he does not fully believe that he will die: he understands the fact that his physical form will perish, but fails to appreciate that he, as the subject of his thoughts and experiences, will also be annihilated (1962, p.297). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Neither are scarcity and fragility always *sufficient* for focus or valuation: we are more than capable of ignoring the value of things we know to be rare or fleeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. In fact, there is only one kind of thing which will *itself* become less fragile and finite if we were all immortal: human beings. Perhaps immortal beings would value other immortal beings a little less then – and I will discuss whether this could pose a problem in section 4.1 – but their valuations of everything else should remain more or less untouched. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Indeed, one might even argue that coming across *the* same object again and again might not result in the exact same experiences, since one would have grown and developed in the intervening time, and hence one could even treat distinct interactions with identical objects as, in a sense, scarce. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Kolodny makes this point as well (2013, p.167). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. For instance, as I have claimed in 2.2, someone like Martin Luther King may still appear to have had a meaningful existence even if we imagine he was utterly disinterested in his work. Whether this is right or not will ultimately depend on whether any feeling of engagement is truly necessary for meaningfulness but, as I noted in 2.3, this is unclear at best. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Bortolotti and Nagasawa give a similar summary of the dilemma presented by Williams (2009, p.261). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Alternatively, if we do decide to label this kind of personality change a 'change in identity', it's not clear that such a change would be problematic in any substantial way. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. This point is also made in Chappell (2007), Smuts (2011, p.137), Quigley and Harris (2009, p.75), and Bortolotti (2010, p.48). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. E.g. Chappell (2007, p.40), Perry (2004), Noonan (2013, p.19), and More (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. It is important to note that the incompletability of such projects does not necessarily render them *futile*. Rather, the value of open-ended projects is supposed to be generated or acquired along the way, rather than being entirely contained at some end-point of final success. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Velleman, for one, thinks that “projects have come to be overrated in moral philosophy” (2012, p.520). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Obviously, in time an immortal writer may find themselves writing novels which others (or even themselves) have already written at some point in the vastly distant past (more about this in Chapter 4), but who's to say that someone who truly loves writing could not still find some value in this activity, just as someone can find value in re-reading the same book? [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. On the same note, Fischer claims, “Given the existence of such [repeatable] pleasures, a life with a suitable arrangement of them need not be boring” (2009, p.88). [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. This, naturally, would also be mixed in with certain pleasures we can only experiences on repeat visits, such as the pleasure of anticipating a good passage, or spotting some clever foreshadowing, or a theme one had missed first time around. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. David Blumenfeld, for one, argues that life needs genuine novelty to be meaningful, not just the *feeling* of novelty (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. This would follow so long as we grant, as seems reasonable, that it would be a significant achievement to build a pyramid or scale Mount Everest, but less and less so the second, third, fourth… etc. times one did it. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Shelly Kagan also talks about the possibility that immortal beings might simply get tired of doing *anything*, despite the existence of ‘new’ projects ready for them to engage with (2012, p.243), and Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin call something like this ‘motivation boredom’ (2014, p.361). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Such as Bargdill (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Although Bortolotti and Nagasawa do note that some external factors might also play a role, such as the “lack of freedom and isolation” that can sometimes bring on habitual boredom in prisoners, they point out that these features are specific to prison life and would not, as far as we know, be necessary features of immortal life (2009, p.271). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Again, for simplicity, when I say ‘meaningfulness’ in the remainder of this thesis, this can be read as ‘the meaningfulness we typically want’, unless otherwise clarified. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. The story itself tells of a Roman soldier who was on a quest to find a magical river that grants those who drink from it immortality. Yet, that immortality is ultimately presented as more of a curse than a reward. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. May also makes this point, arguing: “If we were immortal… Personal relationships would change as well. They would become less serious, since less would be at stake.” For instance, “The bonds between parents and children would probably slacken if children were no longer dependent on their parents for survival” (2009, pp.60). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. By ‘positively significant’ I mean significant for generating a substantial amount of value, which, I have noted, is necessary to obtain the kind of meaningfulness which we typically want most, but here I have just labelled ‘meaningfulness’. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. By ‘diligence’ in this section, I mean to refer to the kind of activity which may be drawn out in time but appears to involve only negligible skill to make progress. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. The same argument can be found in Robert Nozick's work where he states: “The dual assumption that some limitation is necessary for meaning, and limitation in time is the only one that can serve, is surely too ill established to convince anyone that mortality is good for him” (2001, p.580). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. As I discuss in section 4.4, however, whether such activity could last *forever*, or remain *eternally* significant in certain contexts, is less clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Bramble also makes this point (2015, p.451). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. To be fair to Martela and Kauppinen, it is not clear that they see irreplaceability as strictly necessary for meaningfulness; for them it may be something which merely *enhances* it. Nevertheless, to the extent irreplaceability is not a strict requirement, lacking uniqueness would not pose a problem for immortal lives to be minimally meaningful. Thus, it is only the stronger irreplaceability condition I need to consider here. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Smuts (2013, p.554) also gives an interesting counter-argument to Bramble’s irreplaceability condition involving possible-world replacements for Hitler. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Velleman, for one, expresses this worry, noting that he doesn't see the boredom argument posing a problem to the desirability of immortality, but that he is concerned with the idea of immortal beings running out of *meaningful* projects (2012, p.520). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Some significant achievements, like defeating an injustice or inventing some technological marvel, easily fit the structure of solving a substantial problem. However, I think other kinds of significant achievement can fit this structure too, provided we understand ‘problem’ very broadly such that, for instance, living in a world without Joseph Heller’s novel *Catch-22* could be considered a problem afflicting those living before 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. The same goes for the example I gave earlier of climbing Mount Everest, since this is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles; no one *needs* to be at the peak of Mount Everest, and even if they did, there are probably more efficient ways of getting their than hiking on foot. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Bradford, for another example, acknowledges that certain complex and challenging games, such as her ‘advanced catch’ could be a somewhat meaningful activity (2015, p.11). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. For instance, Blumenfeld notes that “a person could accept the offer, arguing that while he would prefer a meaningful life of new achievements, even the meaningless repetition of his old life would be better than oblivion” (2009, p.376). [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Even if we take away 50% of this potential, generously for the mortalists, to account for the loss of certain opportunities for significance described earlier (e.g. no ‘life or death’ accomplishments), the typical immortal would still have the potential to achieve fifty times the significance of the typical mortal. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Similarly, Kauppinen worries that James Dean’s life could have become meaningless if he lived ‘too long’ without producing any more value (2012, p.373-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Hart seems to be making a similar or analogous point when he claims: “Over time, each experience becomes less significant, literally to an infinitesimal degree... how meaningful will those same seventy or eighty years be as an infinitesimal point in an eternity of experience?” (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. And I will discuss this worry further in Chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. For instance, Ismael writes: “The fact that we die means that our lives are framed, and frames are to be embraced. They are what allow lives to constitute meaningful wholes” (2006, p.7). Scarre (2007, p.58) and Kaufmann (1976, p.244) also make similar arguments. Whilst Behrendt (2007), Fischer (2005), and Bortolotti (2010) discuss this notion critically. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Seachris then argues that the ’big’ meaning of all life is something to be provided, or searched for, in the form of a narrative – specifically, a narrative which answers various existentially weighty questions (2009, p.18). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. However, most other theorists make it very clear that the meaning/value they see as potentially present in a human life here is *not* aesthetic value. For examples, see Velleman (1991, p.72), Kauppinen (2012, p.373), Fischer (2009, p.167), and Heyd and Miller (2010, p.24). This is because stories which are very exciting or entertaining to read needn’t always involve protagonists with desirable or meaningful lives. Franz Kafka’s stories, for instance, are seen as having aesthetic value, but their protagonists’ situations are almost always quite bleak and meaningless. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. This point is also found in Metz (2013, p.50) and Velleman (1991, p.50-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Metz agrees with this point as well (2013, p.50). [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. In fact, Kauppinen (2012) also uses the term ‘coherence’ in his theory, as I have mentioned, though it is a slightly stipulative, technical definition, and so not completely in line with what I have in mind here. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. The notion of a tragedy being ‘redeemed’ by paving the way for future goods or inspiring valuable lessons is Velleman’s term (1991, p.55). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. This terminology comes from Kauppinen (2012, p.358). [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. As I noted in Chapter 2, and will expand upon in Chapter 8, there are other factors beside the general *structure* of one’s life-story which are also relevant to the overall coherence of a person’s life (such as the appropriateness of their beliefs, plans, or efforts). Nevertheless, these factors are not brought up in any mortalist arguments, so I put them aside in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. For the avoidance of doubt, I do not have a strict threshold in mind for how comprehensible a life-story must be for the life to be meaningful, but I presume the ‘adequacy’ level is somewhere in between minimal comprehensibility and complete or ideal comprehensibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. What determines a life-story’s comprehensibility or intelligibility? I believe it has something to do with how easy it is for us to lay out the different events in the life and see how they are causally interrelated, which in turn is probably influenced by whether the plot-turns in the life align with our expectations about how events and lives normally play out. This means that there may be room for different individuals to perceive the same life as having different levels of comprehensibility – and I will discuss the relativity of coherence in general further in Chapter 8 – however, for now, I suggest that we should treat a kind of ‘everyday’ perspective (i.e. a generic, clear-thinking member of the human race, abstracted from any particular culture or time period) as providing ‘default’ judgements of comprehensibility we can use here. If it can be shown that immortal life-stories would not necessarily appear incomprehensible even to this everyday perspective, then I will consider the mortalists’ claim that immortal life-stories are necessarily incomprehensible full-stop to have been defeated. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. And this seems reasonable, after all, how much sense could we make of a novel where two of every three pages were merely descriptions of the protagonist asleep, at the supermarket, or watching television? [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. With the assumption that when I say someone’s life-story is incomprehensible overall, that means that none of their true-enough life-stories pass the relevant threshold of comprehensibility, whereas if I say their life-story is comprehensible overall, then that means at least *one* of their life-stories pass this threshold (but likely many will do). [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Bortolotti (2010, p.40) and Fischer (2005, p.397) each summarise the argument in a similar way. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Brannmark agrees that the true importance or meaning of events in our life-stories seems to be un-fixed as they continue being written (2003, p.333). [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Interestingly, this sort of argument also implies that mortal beings cannot be said to have meaningful lives until they actually die, since only then will their life-story become comprehensible. However, as I will demonstrate, the crucial premise this argument is built on (3) is flawed. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Kauppinen briefly acknowledges something like this crucial point in a footnote, writing: “the narrative significance of an event can change even after one’s death” (2012, p.374). [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Similarly, Carroll writes “Save utter apocalypse, it is metaphysically inconceivable that there should be an effect after which no further events ensue” (2007, p.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Whether we would be *right* to infer the meaninglessness of someone’s life based on the absence of traces of their life at some distant future time is a question I will address in Chapter 7, since it is a problem pertaining specifically to mortal lives. Traces of immortal lives, after all, will *always* be around in the sense that the immortal beings themselves will exist eternally at the very least. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Ultimately, Behrendt rejects strong closure as well, and with it: “the view that it is at the end of life, if at all, that we secure meaning for the whole of a life, elevating it from the status of mere chronology to narrative proper” (2014, p.344). [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. This is affirmed by Seachris (2011, p.149). [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Behrendt also appears to claim something along these lines, though not in Carroll’s language of narrative questions and closure (2007, p.147). [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. One well known pure whole-lifer, on some interpretations at least, is Martin Heidegger (1962), who argued, in brief, that we can only grasp the *meaning* of our existence because our lives are finite, and our future potential is constrained by the limit of our death. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. It is worth noting that the immortalist school of thought might coincide with a religious perspective, given it suggests that immortality is necessary for meaningfulness, and religion often promises literal immortality. Nevertheless, the immortalist school of thought is also compatible with agnostic or atheistic perspectives as well, both optimistically (if one believes that non-supernatural immortality might be possible) and pessimistically (if one does not). [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Alternatively, another formulation of this argument could claim that our efforts are ultimately purposeless because they are not even aimed at perpetuating our existence, perhaps because we simply perform most of these actions unreflectively. Thus, our lives would still fail to be purposeful and meaningful because we act without being conscious of any proper final goal. However, both arguments fail for the same sorts of reasons, so there is no need to discuss them independently. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. To deny that the value of the project is found either along the way or in some final state appears to deny that the project holds any value at all, in which case whether or not death interrupted it would seem to be inconsequential. Death could not prevent us from enjoying the fruits of this activity because it never promised any fruit. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Alternatively, the project could have value *both* in some end-state *and* in progress itself, in which case it would suffer both objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. An analogous point is also often made with regard to our physical *size* in relation to the scale of the universe. However, while this point may or may not be relevant to the significance of our lives, it does not have much to do with our mortality, so I will try to focus solely on the issue of our longevity. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. For instance, Vohanka and Vohankova express something along these lines (2011, p.4), as does Nagel (1971, p.717), Blackburn (2001, p.79), Rescher (1990, p.153), and many others. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Indeed, this is how Dan Weijers (2014) seems to see things. However, he takes an optimistic stance, suggesting that the advancements of science and technology could ensure that we will eventually be able to make the kind of great, long-lasting consequences that meaningfulness requires (p.12). [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Landau is also open to theories of meaningfulness which include *no* component of impact or significance whatsoever, not just low impact (2011, p.729). Nevertheless, since this contradicts my preferred theory, I will not discuss this possibility here. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Though I see no reason why non-human beings should not also be included here, for simplicity, I will be ignoring our potential to positively impact, say, animal or alien life. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Brill calls something like this argument the ‘Million-Years Argument’, since it is by looking forward a million years that its conclusions are revealed to us (2007, p.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Edwards also comes to a similar conclusion, asserting: “Striving is not pointless if it achieves what it is intended to achieve even if it is without *final* consequence” (1967, p.123). [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Comments made by Trisel also suggest he is sympathetic to this way of seeing things (2004, p.390). [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Special relativity also entails that there can be no fact of the matter about whether two events happened simultaneously or not, making it difficult for presentists to claim there is just one ‘present’ moment. Putnam (1967) made an early version of this argument. See Markosian (2016) for more on this subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. In fact, it was a little more complicated than this, given the possibility of any single life being amenable to narrativisation into *multiple* true-enough life-stories, but here again I will proceed with a more simplified account. Where I say that a person’s life-story is comprehensible though, strictly speaking this should be read as the claim that at least *one* of their true-enough life-stories was adequately comprehensible, and when I say a person’s life-story was incomprehensible, this should be read as the claim that *none* of these life-stories were adequately comprehensible. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. In Chapter 5, I also quoted Jaspers (1970, p.200) and Tallis (2015, p.21) as making the claim that our life-stories can never reach neat conclusions in our lifetimes. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Nagel then argues that our *lives themselves* can be seen as absurd primarily because of our ability to take two conflicting perspectives on the values and principles by which we live our lives. From one, we see our interests and goals as incredibly important, and yet, from another perspective, they can seem trivial or unjustified (1971, p.719). Since this worry has no bearing on mortality, however, I will not discuss it further. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. The fact that many instances of absurdity are also humorous could thus be a potential *consequence* of their underlying discrepancy/disharmony, rather than a constitutive feature of absurdity itself. Indeed, many philosophers argue that some kind of incongruity or unexpectedness is at the root of all humorous situations (Morreall, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. And I will discuss this latter kind of absurdity in 8.4.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Sometimes the unexpected disharmony which we see absurdity arising from can be the disharmony between reality and our own violated expectation itself (e.g. this may be true in Camus’ case). Indeed, there will always be some degree of disharmony between reality and our expectations whenever we perceive an absurdity, by definition. Nevertheless, since this disharmony is not always the *relevant* one – i.e. the disharmony we actually see as absurd – it is still useful to keep condition I distinct from condition II. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. It may also be tempting to say ‘I perceived X as absurd but, had I been more informed prior to discovering it, I would not have. Therefore, X is not truly absurd.’ But again, this would be the wrong way to think about things. It would be like saying ‘I found my surprise birthday party surprising but, had I been more informed beforehand, I would not have. Therefore, my party wasn’t truly surprising.’ Obviously, though, there is no fact about whether the party was truly surprising, only whether it was, in fact, experienced as surprising by certain individuals. Similarly, there is no fact about whether some disharmony is itself truly absurd. Sometimes two individuals can have different perceptions on whether some disharmony is absurd or not and sometimes those differences are caused by differing levels of background knowledge prior to encountering the disharmony, but that does not mean the more knowledgeable person’s judgement is more authoritative or correct. The only exception, as noted above, is if a person failed to understand the basic facts of the scenario they were evaluating, in which case their judgement of absurdity would apply only to the scenario as it appears in their imagination, and not to the scenario as it actually is. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. One might recognise the ‘everyday’ perspective described above as the one I suggested we use as the ‘default’ for examining the comprehensibility of immortals’ life-stories in footnote 106 of section 5.1. This is not an accident; the argumentative strategy just outlined could also have been used in that chapter. Nevertheless, as it was possible to demonstrate that immortal life-stories would not necessarily appear incomprehensible even to this everyday standpoint, there was no need to introduce the complication of other possible standpoints into my argument at that point. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Even when not preposterous, most deaths seem to come for fairly arbitrary reasons like accidents or illnesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Again, it is permissible to have gaps in one’s background knowledge or faulty assumptions/expectations (indeed, judgements of absurdity can only occur when such things are present), but for one’s judgement of absurdity to count as legitimate, one must grasp the basic facts of the scenario in question, otherwise it is not *the* actual scenario which one judges absurd (or otherwise) but rather a different scenario which appears only in one’s imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Brill goes further than this, arguing that demands for permanence, for instance, are irrational and unreasonable, and so should be rejected as patently silly (2007, p.13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. With notable exceptions, of course, such as cold-callers, direct-mailers, or loan-sharks. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Though, as suggested in 3.3, I am personally not convinced. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Where each component would be rated on a scale starting at 0 and getting larger depending on the proportion or magnitude of each variable the life possessed. Note that each variable is multiplied together since increasing any one should increase the overall level of meaningfulness in the life. Yet, if the life failed to possess any factor to a sufficient degree (i.e. getting a score of 0 for that variable), that would render the life entirely meaningless overall (as multiplying by 0 reduces everything to 0). [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. If I had to explain *why* the irreplaceability of one’s contributions seems to matter, I might suggest that it has something to do with the causal connection between the individual and their impact; the significance of an achievement seems to belong to me in a more profound causal way if I was uniquely capable of securing it. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. As noted in this chapter, there may be other death-related disharmonies which I have not considered – indeed it would be impossible to prove I had discussed them all – however, at least for these six most obvious examples, I have shown that they are insufficient to secure either of the mortalists’ conclusions, and I can think of no others that would be sufficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. That is, at least, provided all other aspects of their lives remain fixed apart from the absence of death; if immortality also involved the loss of our bodily needs or limitations, this conclusion would be less certain. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. If I were to write out a more precise formula for meaningfulness based on the details and additions which my thesis has uncovered, it might look something like this:

     Meaningfulness = P x [I x (1 + U) x C] x [S x A]

     Where each variable is assigned a value of 0 or higher and P = the amount of life spent *purposefully*, I = the positive *impact* or contribution of the life, U = the *uniqueness* of that contribution, C = the *challenge* involved in producing that contribution, S = the comprehensibility of the life’s *structure* or plot, and A = the degree to which the life is free of *absurdity*.

     Note, again, that each variable is multiplied together since I have been assuming that entirely lacking any one of these factors could ruin the overall meaningfulness of one’s life (as multiplying by 0 reduces everything to 0). The only exception being uniqueness, which I have suggested enhances the significance or meaningfulness of a life without being absolutely required for it (although I am open to the suggestion that some of the other variables may also function this way). [↑](#footnote-ref-149)