

THESIS

THE PRAGMATIC FULFILLMENT VIEW AND EVALUATIONS OF MEANING IN LIFE

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ABSTRACT

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Susan Wolf developed her well-known Fitting Fulfillment View in the hope of avoiding some of the pitfalls of a purely subjective approach to understanding meaning in life. In doing so, Wolf built in an objective criterion for qualifying for a meaningful life. This objective criterion makes it necessary for one to engage in *appropriately worthy pursuits* if her life is to be considered meaningful. Wolf concedes to the difficulties of filling out the details of a “worthiness condition” for conferring meaning to one’s life. It is my hope here to provide a framework that will help clarify Wolf’s worthiness condition. Specifically, I will argue that certain readings or strains of American pragmatism can be useful in constructing appropriately worthy or attractive pursuits for increasing meaning in life. I will argue that this approach—the Pragmatic Fulfillment View—will not only elucidate a worthiness condition but will also have the distinct advantages of being both maximally inclusive and practically-oriented toward amplifying meaning in life.

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DEDICATION

For Adam, my philosophical Polaris

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INTRODUCTION

There is a scene in *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* where a handful of white men clad in business suits, owners and employees of "The Very Big Corporation of America," sit around a large boardroom table discussing all matters bureaucratic on the schedule for the day. The chairman at the head of the table announces to the board, "Item six on the agenda: the Meaning of Life. Now Harry, you've had some thoughts on this."

"That's right, yeah," says Harry, glancing down at a folder. "I've had a team working on this over the past few weeks, and what we've come up with can be reduced to two fundamental concepts. One, people are not wearing enough hats. Two, matter is energy. In the Universe there are many energy fields which we cannot normally perceive. Some energies have a spiritual source which act upon a person's soul. However, this soul does not exist *ab initio* as orthodox Christianity teaches; it has to be brought into existence by a process of guided self-observation. However, this is rarely achieved owing to man's unique ability to be distracted from spiritual matters by everyday trivia."

After a long pause, a man across the table says, "What was that about hats again?"¹

The subject of the meaning of life was ripe for parody at the hands of Monty Python. It's been propped up as perhaps the most important and perennial question for human existence—so much so, in fact, that the issue has, to varying degrees, been rendered absurd or even meaningless. But the oversaturation of the question of meaning in life has not prevented it from being a serious topic for philosophers. The degree of focus on meaning in life has waxed and waned throughout philosophical history, with some eras and traditions having it as the locus of inquiry and still

¹ *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*, directed by Terry Jones (1983; United Kingdom: Universal Pictures)

others setting it aside completely. Ancient philosophical traditions, e.g. *eudaimonistic* traditions, were heavily focused on how to live well or flourish (which would often include finding meaning or purpose). And same goes for soteriological traditions, including most religions, which were and are concerned with salvation in some sense. The Abrahamic traditions, as an example, state that meaning comes through salvation which can, roughly, come through dedicating one's life to god.

The influence of these ancient views is difficult to understate, as talk about meaning in life did not stop there. Though these days it seems to be more the territory of therapists and theologians than that of academic philosophers, the question of meaning in life nevertheless came to the philosophical fore in the mid-20th century. Existentialism acts as an exemplar of a philosophical school of thought concerned with meaning in life. There are a variety of existentialisms, including feminist existentialism, black existentialism, and even theistic existentialism (though for Jean-Paul Sartre existentialism was “nothing else than an attempt to draw all the consequences of a coherent atheistic position.”²) What tethers all existentialisms together, however, is the notion that meaning must be created through the exercise of freedom. Even if there is a god, it is not through a heavenly being that meaning in life is bestowed. It is up to us, as individuals, as free subjects, to decide on how to live life with meaning. Sartre famously described this as “existence preceding essence”: we are born, we exist, and *then* we must choose to craft our own essence, our own purpose or meaning.

Roughly, the above sketches capture two primary approaches to the question of meaning in life. The former—the *eudaimonistic* and soteriological traditions—and the latter—the existentialist traditions—represent objective accounts of meaning and subjective accounts of meaning, respectively. An objective account of meaning states that meaning in life arises through the pursuit

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014)

or acquisition of something that is external or independent of any one person's attitudes or opinions about meaning. There is some stickiness regarding to what degree a *eudaimonistic* or soteriological view counts as objective, but this is something I will expand on later. Basically, on an objective account, one's life is meaningful to the extent that she is committed to appropriate, fitting, or worthy things *outside of herself*. A given person's attitudes or feelings of meaningfulness are secondary or even unnecessary in accounting for how meaningful her life actually is. This is why the standard is considered objective.

Conversely, a subjective account of meaning in life states that meaning occurs to the extent that the individual person *feels* or *believes* that her life is meaningful. The standard of meaningfulness is completely contingent on the individual agent's attitudes about its meaningfulness. What that person is up to, what she dedicates her time and passion to, is beside the point. On a purely subjectivist account of meaning, it wouldn't matter if you lived your life rolling a boulder up a hill or watching your fingernails grow or sitting on a flagpole or passionately spreading suffering to satiate your sadistic leanings; you are living a meaningful life insofar as you ascribe meaning to it. The existentialist traditions (on some readings) are radically subjective in this sense.

These two views capture a good deal of the popular intuitions regarding humanity's capacity for obtaining meaning in life. There are, of course, variations and nuances to accompany each of these views, as well as a diverse range of other options. The Absurdist position championed by Albert Camus, for instance, doesn't clearly fit into either of these categories. Absurdism, though typically mentioned in the same breath with existentialism, wants to set aside questions of meaning

in life, and instead just live. The nihilist, too, fails to fit into either category, simply by merit of denying the possibility of meaning in life from the get-go.

This paper, however, will be concerned with still another approach that fails to fall under a purely objective or purely subjective account of meaning in life. The stance I wish to sketch will fall under the broad category of “hybrid views” about meaning in life. They are considered “hybrids” because they aren’t quite subjective nor quite objective, but nevertheless utilize elements of each without leaning entirely on one or the other. I will be looking at probably the most well-known contemporary hybrid view about meaning in life: Susan Wolf’s “Fitting Fulfillment View.” I will be taking Wolf’s view as the launching point for a related-but-different hybrid view. In short, this stance will be using elements from American Pragmatism to fill out what I think are some of the weaker or underdeveloped areas of the Fitting Fulfillment View.

The first chapter will explain the details of Susan Wolf’s Fitting Fulfillment View. This section will include an elucidation of “subjectivity” and “objectivity,” since these are fraught terms that are heavily relied upon throughout Wolf’s work. The basic characterizations provided in the introduction will be expanded on, including an explanation for how Wolf uses them for her meaning in life framework. The second chapter will explore the history of pragmatism. This genealogy of pragmatism will serve to clarify which aspects of the tradition I will be exploiting in order to develop my Pragmatic Fulfillment View. The final chapter of the paper will look at how pragmatism can work with Wolf’s view. Specifically, this chapter will look at the implications for pragmatism’s attempts to collapse the subject/object divide. I will argue that this has the consequence of dropping an objective standard for what would be considered “worthy” pursuits for meaning in life, while at the same time arguing that doing so does not commit pragmatism to

mere subjectivity. Finally, I will look at some of the benefits that the Pragmatic Fulfillment View has over Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment View, including a marked increase in plurality and inclusivity for what "counts" as a meaningful life while still providing practical guidance on how to amplify meaningfulness.

CHAPTER ONE: SUSAN WOLF AND MEANING IN LIFE

1.1 Meaning in Life vs. *The Meaning of Life*

In 1988, LIFE Magazine collected some 300 responses from people regarding the question of the meaning of life. They reached out to a diverse range of folks, from influential public figures to intellectuals to “sages in streets” like cab drivers and children. An eight-year-old third grader named Serin Marshal, for instance, gave this response:

The meaning
Of Life
flowers growing you me
taxes birds trees Love
feeling mommy, Daddy,
Bouther, sister, unkl, red, grean,
yellow mickey mouse
white, orange, blue,
clows houses man woman
Phones John Adams akanomicks
The End³

And the humorist Marc Kravitz said, “The reason we are here is to ask ‘Why are we here?’ and have the question go unanswered.”⁴ We are presented with varied and wide-ranging answers throughout LIFE Magazine’s collection. But as the framing of the query goes to show, it is common to ponder *the* meaning of life.

Implicit in such a pondering is that there is one single meaning to life. It might be that there is one meaning to everyone’s life, as in it’s the same for each of us. Or it might be the case that each of has our own unique or special meaning. At any rate, the clichéd framing of this question (echoed in the title of the abovementioned Monty Python film) implies that there is a

³ *The Meaning of Life: Reflections in Words and Pictures on Why We Are Here*, ed. David Friend (Chicago, The Time Inc. Magazine Company, 1991) 93

⁴ *Ibid.* 160

meaning, i.e. *the* meaning of life. For a lot of folks, it is obvious to them what the meaning of life is. Commonplace answers include dedicating one's life to serving or worshipping a deity; another is passing on our genes and taking care of our children, acting as curator for future generations. These singular conceptions of the meaning of life are not at issue for me here. I am less concerned with a (or the) meaning of life—as if there were a definite, grand answer built into life, the universe, and everything⁵—and more concerned about the possibility of meaning *in* life. And since this thesis will be concerned with meaning in life, I suspect I ought to get right to explaining what meaning in life might mean.

Questions about *the* meaning of life aside, issues of the possibility or nature of meaning in life remain salient. Richard Taylor wrote that when you confront the question of meaning in life, “you want to turn it aside, as a source of embarrassment, as something that, if it cannot be abolished, should at least be decently covered. And yet,” he continued, “I think any reflective person recognizes that the question it raises is important, and that it ought to have a significant answer.”⁶ But in order to approach anything resembling significant answers, if they do exist, we must first get clear on the question.

So what might be meant by “meaning in life”? It should be noted, firstly, that the category of “meaningfulness” should be taken as non-reducible to categories of happiness or morality. It might be the case that meaningfulness is collapsed into happiness in public discourse, evidenced by the profusion of self-help books attempting to sell us happiness as a cure-all, but that is something I want to explicitly avoid in this paper. When I speak of meaning in life, I am not speaking about mere hedonic satisfaction or about some broad normative framework. I want to it

⁵ Accuracy aside, just writing “42” doesn't make for a compelling (or passable) thesis

⁶ Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000) 319

to be an open possibility that meaningful lives might not be particularly happy lives. Similarly, I don't want meaningfulness here to be thought synonymous with or reducible to morality. It might be the case that someone might live a thoroughly meaningless life (or at least a life with very little meaning) without doing anything morally wrong. Though this distinction is one more of convenience than ontology, I want to maintain a separation of these categories. Thus, the definition of meaning I'll provide will be tentative, pluralistic, and vague—taking in *elements* of happiness and morality—but it should nonetheless be seen as a related but separate category. In her book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, the philosopher Susan Wolf argues that there are two traditional approaches to defining meaning in life.⁷ Wolf's breakdown of these two approaches is related, though distinct, from the issues of subjective and objective constructions of meaning in life. Accordingly, before explicating Wolf's views on these popular and intuitive approaches to meaning in life, I must take a necessary detour to explain what is meant by “subjective” and “objective.”

1.2 Subjectivity and Objectivity

Subjectivity and objectivity are difficult terms. They are used in multifarious ways in the scientific and philosophical literature, it is true. But the real confusion comes from the nebulous and ever-changing manner they are deployed in common parlance. They range the gamut from meaning something akin to “non-biased” to “imaginary.” You might catch someone saying that political views are “just subjective,” apparently using the term to mean mere opinion. Or perhaps someone will throw around “objective” as a synonym for capital-t Truth. At any rate, because of the difficulty of these terms I want to try to get clear on what they will mean for the purposes of this specific essay. In the introduction, I gave a cursory description of subjectivity, saying that

⁷ Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

according to such a view, meaning in life arises through the attitudes of an individual. In other words, meaning in life can be considered subjective in this sense if it is deemed so through a subject's—i.e. a thinking, feeling, person's—qualitative experience. Life is meaningful insofar as it is felt and believed to be meaningful by an experiencing agent. To make this view clear, I want to talk a bit about rolling a rock up a hill.

Albert Camus famously appealed to Ancient Greek mythology to find a metaphor for life. He conjured up the image of the cursed king Sisyphus, who was condemned to an eternity of pushing a boulder up a hillside, only to have it roll down over and over again, his interminable task never amounting to anything. Camus stated that we are all in similar (though finite) positions as Sisyphus: condemned to menial tasks with no ultimate purpose. This, however, should not leave us in despair (or at least not permanent despair), says Camus. Rather, we should embrace this absurd situation and live on. “*Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux,*” Camus said. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”⁸ The image of Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill has become ubiquitous in discussions of meaning in life. I have no intention of skirting this trend, as it proves to be a very elucidating metaphor. Accordingly, I will appeal to Sisyphus, and various thinkers’ interpretations and exploitations of him, throughout this paper. The image is useful here and now because it can help us make sense of my use of subjectivity. A smiling Sisyphus, or what Wolf calls “Sisyphus Fulfilled,” is a strong illustration of what it would mean for meaning in life to be tied purely to the subjective attitudes or passions of the individual.⁹ Richard Taylor developed a clear way of demonstrating this by having us imagine that the gods decided to grant Sisyphus some degree of

⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York City: Vintage, 1991)

⁹ Though, to be clear, Camus’ specific use of a happy Sisyphus did not imply that meaning was conferred to Sisyphus’s life; rather, it was illustrative of Sisyphus’s decision to embrace the absurdity of his position and to go on living. See Camus (1991) for specifics.

mercy and bestowed him with a psychological disposition where he derived great fulfillment from his perpetual boulder-pushing. By doing this, the gods “managed to give Sisyphus precisely what he wants—by making him want precisely what they inflict on him... His one desire in life is to roll stones, and he is absolutely guaranteed its endless fulfillment.”¹⁰ Whereas the original image of Sisyphus, as someone fated to suffer a painstaking and ceaseless existence of triviality, was the absolute epitome of meaninglessness, Taylor argues that this alternative scenario—Sisyphus Fulfilled—represents something truly meaningful. The scenarios are identical in all but one respect: the psychological state or pro-attitudes of the agent. But this one change makes all the difference in the world, according to both Taylor and the subjectivist. Sisyphus’s life is “now filled with mission and meaning.”¹¹

Susan Wolf categorizes broadly subjective views about meaning in life as “Fulfillment Views.” Wolf holds that under the Fulfillment View meaning in life occurs through finding and pursuing one’s passions.¹² This is the classic view that to live a meaningful life is just to have one’s passionate desires fulfilled. It’s the “do what you love” kind of view. Positive experience, accordingly, is the only thing that matters. “The Fulfillment View,” says Wolf, “is a form of hedonism, in that its prescription for the best possible life (in which is included the possession of meaning) rests exclusively on the question of how a life can attain the best qualitative character.”¹³ According to this basic construction of the Fulfillment View, then, if someone passionately enjoys rolling a boulder up a hill or picking their bellybutton, if doing so truly makes them *feel* fulfilled, then they are living a meaningful life.

¹⁰ Taylor, 323

¹¹ Ibid. 324

¹² Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, 10

¹³ Ibid. 15

On the other side of this divide are objective accounts of meaning. In the introduction, I described objective views as claiming that meaning in life must come through something outside of the qualitative experience or pro-attitudes or assessments of individual agents. To take an example from religion, in John 14:6, a darling verse in the Christian tradition, Jesus says that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” and it is only *through him* that one can achieve a meaningful relationship with the divine. And, unsurprisingly, a relationship with the divine is a necessary condition for a meaningful life, according to most Christian views. In this scenario, it doesn’t matter how a person feels about their life; what matters is that they are dedicated to the right (and righteous) pursuits. Thaddeus Metz categorizes this type of soteriological view as a form of “supernaturalism,” and thus separate from *naturalistically* objective and subjective views.¹⁴ This separation can be useful, but not important for my purposes. I will count supernaturalist views as objective insofar as they require of someone the pursuit of something outside of themselves (or subjective insofar as they fulfill the subjective requirements). Accordingly, objective accounts of meaning set aside the attitudes or emotional experiences of the people in question. “Their idea,” writes Metz, “is that not just any condition could confer meaning on a person’s life, no matter what her mental orientation towards it [...] a life cannot matter simply by virtue of urinating in snow and chewing gum, however much those activities might be wanted or sought-out.”¹⁵ It can be possible, according to objective views, for people to live utterly miserable lives, but for those lives to still be profoundly meaningful. Reports and experiences of meaningfulness have no bearing on whether or not a life is actually meaningful.

¹⁴ Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 20

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

These objective accounts of meaning are associated with what Wolf calls “Larger-than-Oneself Views.”¹⁶ As Wolf makes sure to note, this is metaphorical language, not meant to be interpreted as pursuing things that are literally physically larger than oneself, but something with value independent of oneself.¹⁷ As Wolf puts it, “the point is to recommend that one get involved not with something larger than oneself, but rather with something *other* than oneself—that is, with something the value of which is independent of and has its source *outside of* oneself.”¹⁸ The abovementioned commonsense answers of worshiping god or having children might be seen as examples of “something greater than oneself;” so, too, a life dedicated to charity work or the research of vaccines. Since the “Sisyphus Fulfilled” image is helpful for understanding the subjective view, it might be helpful here to imagine a “Utilitarian Unfulfilled” or a “Grumpy Jesus.” These are accounts where an agent has dedicated her life to a principle or a cause or whatnot that is external to her own being, and, as a result, experiences a truly unhappy, dissatisfied existence to the extent that she personally finds no meaning in it whatsoever. Nevertheless, says the objectivist, she is living a meaningful existence.

Unsurprisingly, there are problems with each of these archetypal approaches to meaning in life. The Fulfillment View, on the face of it, seems to allow for too much. Intuitively, at least, it might be a strike against a theory of meaning if it allows for people to spend their lives doing nothing but picking their bellybuttons. Taylor argues that by adjusting the psychological makeup of Sisyphus, our intuitions will be shifted and we are inclined to view his life as meaningful. Some may be persuaded by this, but many still might consider it too much to allow as meaningful an existence that consists in literally nothing but pushing a rock, regardless of the rock-pusher’s

¹⁶ Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, 18

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 11

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 19

feelings on the matter. Or if that allowance isn't disturbing enough, there certainly seems to something disagreeable about granting as meaningful the life of someone who's passionate about torturing baby animals. But by attaching meaning in life exclusively to the person's evaluative or qualitative attitudes—if a life is meaningful so long as the person claims or feels it to be so—then it doesn't seem like the Fulfillment View would be equipped to exclude the boulder-pushers and baby torturers. Perhaps this bullet is bitable. But it might be worth turning to understanding meaning in life outside of the individual's attitudes in order to avoid that bullet.

Defining meaning in life in terms of the pursuit of something greater than oneself seems to do a better job accounting for the boulder-pushers and baby torturers. But it might overcompensate in the other direction. If we *completely* detach meaning in life from pro-attitudes and qualitative experience, then it wouldn't seem to matter if a person has any feelings of meaningfulness in her life, period; all that would matter would be the degree to which one's life contributes to worthy pursuits greater than oneself. It would appear, then, that some of those nightmare utilitarian scenarios might result in a meaningful life. If, for instance, I was raised in some dystopian medical facility where my sole purpose was to be kept alive to have my organs harvested to contribute to the greater good, then my personal evaluation of the meaningfulness of my life would be secondary to the fact that I was contributing to something greater than myself. My life, despite being devoid of any autonomy or love or pleasure or pro-attitudes, would be meaningful only insofar as I contributed to something fittingly larger than myself. This also seems like a doozy of a bullet to bite. At least at first blush, we want a meaningful life to involve someone who is emotionally engaged with the things we are deeming valuable. Are we willing to grant as meaningful the lives of folks who are utterly disengaged and alienated from their projects, who

completely disagree with its meaningfulness, even those who have lived lives of incessant misery for the benefit of something outside of themselves?

Nevertheless, both the Fulfillment View and the Larger-than-Oneself View, respectively embodied in Sisyphus Fulfilled and Grumpy Jesus, have their intuitive appeal. We might share Taylor’s intuition that an adjustment to the psychology of Sisyphus is all that’s required for the condemned king to live a life rich with meaning. After all, there seems to be something unsavory about denying a meaningful life to someone who says and feels that it is *exactly that*.¹⁹ Similarly, it doesn’t feel quite right to deny as meaningful the life of someone who created stirring art or synthesized a life-saving vaccine or dedicated her life to helping others—even if she didn’t personally find it meaningful. But, as the previous paragraph showed, going all-in on one or the other will cause the model to be far too permissive or restrictive. This is, accordingly, why a hybrid view, a view that takes both subjective and objective elements, is an attractive alternative.

1.3 The Fitting Fulfillment View

Susan Wolf has a particularly well-known hybrid view. For Wolf, the key is finding the right kind of match, or “welding” as she calls it, between the two above views, between attitudes and something greater than our attitudes.²⁰ The way she puts it is that meaning in life arises “when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.”²¹ She calls this her *Fitting Fulfillment View*.²² What this means is that it is necessary for our passions to be engaged, that a person’s life can be meaningful only if “she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped,

¹⁹ I will address worries of elitism later in the paper

²⁰ Ibid. 10

²¹ Ibid. 9

²² Ibid. 25

excited, interested, engaged,” etc.²³ But these passions are not enough (or else it would just be a subjective view). It is also necessary for the things about which we are passionate to be *worthy* of our passions. “Meaning arises,” continues Wolf, “from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way.”²⁴

As Wolf readily acknowledges, her use of the terms “worthy” and “fitting” are quite contentious.²⁵ What would it mean, exactly, to say that certain objects or activities or interests are objectively *worthy* of being loved or pursued? Wolf admits that this is perhaps the most serious challenge to her view. Wolf writes, “Which projects, one wants to know, are fitting for fulfillment? Which objects are worthy of love? How does one determine whether an activity is fitting or worthy or of independent value? For that matter, why accept the legitimacy of these judgments at all?”²⁶ These are difficult questions to answer and, as Wolf says, they go to the heart of her proposal. Despite the seriousness of these questions, however, Wolf approaches them lightly. She says that it is not her goal to provide a *theory* of objective value, let alone a foolproof method for uncovering which things or activities possess it.²⁷ Wolf is comfortable speculating as to what kind of activities act as exemplars of meaningfulness, e.g. positive relationships with family and friends, engagement with social causes, creating art, adding knowledge to the world, and so on, but she is quite hesitant to speculate about what tethers all of these activities together. Wolf argues that the development of an objective account of meaningfulness is outside the scope of her project. Rather, her goal is of a more modest sort. She simply wants to posit *that a purely subjective account is inadequate*. “In

²³ Ibid. 9

²⁴ Ibid. 8

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. 35

²⁷ Ibid. 33

claiming that meaningfulness has an objective component,” Wolf writes, “I mean only to insist that something other than a radically subjective account of value must be assumed.”²⁸

Part of Wolf’s justification for staying silent regarding the objective component of her account of meaningfulness is that none of the available options strike her as satisfactory. If none of the popular objective accounts of meaning are satisfactory, it might be reasonable to wonder why Wolf wants to include the criterion at all. Why not just concede to the radically subjective account and abandon an objective component? After all, it is reasonable to wonder what kind of work an objective component is doing in the first place. What does tying meaningfulness to the pursuit of something other than or outside of oneself offer? Why not just allow for a more permissive view of meaningfulness if it proves to be less metaphysically or ethically problematic? Two quick examples of how an objective component can be problematic might make this worry clear. Imagine someone who lives with a life-long illness that requires constant vigilance and upkeep to remain healthy. If that person dedicates her life to taking care of herself, if all of her passions and interests and love are *self-directed*, then on Wolf’s view this person wouldn’t qualify for a meaningful life, since none of her pursuits are fittingly outside of or larger than herself. Conversely, if someone dedicated her life to caring for a loved one, if all of her passions and interests and love are *other-directed*, then this person would at least be a candidate for a meaningful life on Wolf’s account. “It may seem odd that if I benefit you and you benefit me,” explains Wolf, “our activities may contribute to the meaningfulness of each other’s lives, but if we each tend to our own well-being, our actions will have no such effect.”²⁹ It’s not clear, then, why value directed toward oneself would be insufficient for meaning, but when directed at someone else it suddenly becomes sufficient.

²⁸ Ibid. 45

²⁹ Ibid. 42

There is also the further worry as to what would be sufficiently independent from or external to oneself to count as objective. Wolf uses the example of a handful of spectators who enjoy watching Sisyphus push a stone up that cursed mound.³⁰ Would this count as objective since the value is outside or independent of Sisyphus's attitudes? If so, this would seem like an unacceptably lax or arbitrary condition. It would be puzzling why the addition of a third party to Sisyphus's torture would be so significant in assessing its meaningfulness.³¹ In addition to these worries, there is a concern about elitism and chauvinism, i.e. an ethical concern about who gets to decide what kinds of lives are meaningful. I will address this worry at length later on. The worries at issue for the moment are of a more metaphysical flavor since they call into doubt the category of objective value.

Despite these concerns, Wolf maintains a commitment to an objective component to her account of meaning. She thinks that she can, to a certain degree, avoid some of these worries. First, she makes sure to remind us of the distinctiveness of the category of meaning.³² By preventing meaningfulness from collapsing into happiness or a broader category of value, Wolf maintains that plenty of our actions, including selfish, self-directed actions, can have value without contributing to the category of meaningfulness. Thus, someone who spends her life nursing her own health (and no one else's) can possess certain types of value, including worthwhileness, even reasonableness, in a certain sense; but it does so without contributing to meaningfulness. Wolf fleshes this out by appealing to an external point of view. For Wolf, a meaningful life would be one that would be considered so by an *impartial observer*. "A meaningful life is one that would not be

³⁰ Ibid. 38

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. 42

considered pointless or gratuitous, even from an impartial perspective,” argues Wolf.³³ Accordingly, the objective component of Wolf’s Fitting Fulfillment View aligns her with the ideal-observer traditions. For Wolf, then, we can be guided toward what is meaningful by looking at what would be considered so by a person or persons properly equipped to make such an assessment, a “competent judge,” to use John Stuart Mill’s language. This hypothetical judge would be “sufficiently rational, perceptive, sensitive, and knowledgeable” to make such judgments.³⁴

Notice, though, that Wolf appears to be appealing to an impartial observer for epistemological purposes—that is, for the sake of helping us know how to guide our behavior. Wolf seems to want to avoid metaphysically stronger claims about an ideal-observer actually fixing the content of meaningfulness. Rather, we ought to look at how we would imagine an ideal observer would judge certain lives. Wolf expands on this by pumping our intuitions regarding what kinds of actual lived lives people broadly consider to be paradigms of meaningfulness and, conversely, lives that people broadly conceive as paradigms of meaninglessness. For the latter, Wolf imagines a person who does nothing but passively consume television and beer. Wolf dabbles in some low-key fat-shaming here when she refers to such a person as “The Blob.”³⁵ For her, this person conjures up “as strong an image of a meaningless life as there can be.”³⁶ And then for the former category—exemplars of meaningful lives—Wolf cites great humanitarians and scientific and literary and artistic heroes, e.g. Einstein and Beethoven.³⁷ Wolf establishes these extremes in order to get us to, first, concede that some lives likely have meaning while others do not, and, second, to provide guideposts for knowing how to live life with meaning (and how not to live life without meaning).

³³ Ibid. 46

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wolf, *Variety of Values*, 92

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

Wolf admits that these examples are controversial enough, but she argues that, nonetheless, most of us are able and willing to admit that there are lives that were and are preferable over others in regard to their meaningfulness. After all, she argues, we need not look further than the fact that we ourselves can change our minds on whether or not our life has hitherto been meaningful. We are generally comfortable with admitting, in other words, that we may have been wrong about how meaningful our lives previously were, perhaps because we had a major shift in our values or an awakening of some sort. These facts, argues Wolf, are helpful in explaining “the kind of approval and respect we have both for people who live meaningful as opposed to meaningless lives, and for people who care about the meaningfulness of their lives as opposed to those who are indifferent to it.”³⁸

Again, Wolf wants to wear her objective component loosely. She wants it to be tentative. She argues that other accounts of meaningfulness, e.g. intersubjective and radically objective accounts (some forms of non-natural intuitionism, for example), come burdened with too many unacceptable implications. So, while she appeals to a type of ideal-observer theory, she does so with reservations. Ultimately, she leaves the objective component incomplete. She writes that on her view,

[F]inding an adequate account of the objectivity of values—that is, of the ways or respects in which value judgments are not radically subjective—is an unsolved problem in philosophy, [and] though I believe we have good reason to reject a radically subjective account of value, it is far from clear what a reasonably complete and defensible nonsubjective account will look like.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid. 132

³⁹ Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, 47

It is in this precise area that I think pragmatism can aid Wolf's project. I will argue that pragmatism can be useful in filling out "worthiness conditions," thus making it stand apart from merely subjective views.

1.4 Summary

Wolf does a lovely job of framing the discussion and presenting the two most commonsense approaches to the question of meaning in life. The most salient feature of her view that I want to utilize is the construction of a middle-ground position between subjective and objective accounts of meaning. She writes that what is perhaps most distinctive about her conception of meaning "is that it involves subjective and objective elements, *suitably and inextricably linked*."⁴⁰ This is crucial for my pragmatic conception of meaning. The next section will dive into exactly what I mean by "pragmatism." I think that an extended discussion of the pragmatic tradition is needed, as it's important to get clear on what kind of work pragmatism will ultimately be doing for Wolf's view. And, moreover, pragmatism is notoriously difficult to pin down, in no small part due to its attempt to rethink our approach to Western philosophical traditions.⁴¹ It's important to note here that the pragmatic traditions strive to challenge much philosophical orthodoxy, including the subject/object divide. The discussion up to this point has presupposed, and to some extent hinged upon the existence of this divide. Accordingly, a view that destabilizes or even undermines it will have profound implications for what's been discussed thus far.

At any rate, this section set out to define or at least elucidate "meaning in life." As should be clear by now, this is no easy task. But as I dive into the details of the pragmatic tradition, and the areas therein that I think ought to be taken seriously for the purposes of this paper, I want

⁴⁰ Ibid. 9 [my emphasis]

⁴¹ Something pragmatism shares in common with, among others, feminist philosophy

notions of meaning in life to stay in view. And, for now, I want meaning in life to be taken in Wolf's terms. What I take the phrase to mean, including its broad utility, will be clear as I go on. As it stands, when I say "meaning in life," I will be speaking of a harmony between our attitudes and things worthy of our passions.

CHAPTER TWO: PRAGMATISM

2.1 Genealogy of an Idea

Pragmatism is often considered the only philosophical tradition with its roots planted uniquely in the United States. Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey are pragmatism's most well-known architects and are typically cited as the "Classical Pragmatists." And this just about exhausts the least-controversial aspects of pragmatism.⁴² Beyond this, things start to get messy. Even amongst its founders there was deep disagreement as to how pragmatism should be understood. Though William James is responsible for popularizing the term, it was Peirce who is credited with naming it. Despite this, Peirce found James' characterization of pragmatism to be so misaligned from his original intentions that Peirce decided to demarcate his approach by identifying it as "pragmaticism," a name "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers."⁴³ So, even the name was controversial. For a tradition that from its inception has been riddled with ambiguity and hullabaloo, it is no easy task to provide a standard or pithy definition. The colloquial understanding of pragmatism seems to be a straight synonym with "practical." And politicians and business folks often like to cite themselves as "pragmatists," which seems to just mean they fancy themselves level-headed and clear-minded, with their feet firmly planted on the ground.

There are a variety of reasons for the popularization of these simplistic characterizations. Perhaps this abuse of pragmatist philosophy has its roots in the fact that William James often deployed the term "cash-value" in regard to the usefulness of an idea. But even the standard "textbook" definitions of pragmatism typically boil the approach down to a theory of perception or

⁴² Though still not completely without controversy, as pragmatism nevertheless has its non-American precursors, and its originators other than Peirce, James, and Dewey

⁴³ C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-35) 5.414

truth, something along the lines of “pragmatism is the idea that truth is determined by practical implications or consequences.”⁴⁴ For a literal textbook definition, *The Philosophical Journey* defines pragmatism thusly: “a philosophy that stresses the intimate relation between thought and action by defining the meaning of our conceptions in terms of the practical effects we associate with them and the truth of our beliefs in terms of how successfully they guide our actions.”⁴⁵ And while this is a reasonably nuanced definition of pragmatism, much more helpful than colloquial conceptions, it still commits what Dewey called “*the Philosophic Fallacy*.”⁴⁶ In short, this is the tendency for philosophers to interpret every philosophical issue in light of epistemology.

It comes as no surprise that pragmatism is so often boiled down to its epistemic bones like this, as the analytic tradition has largely revolved around epistemological issues. Thomas M. Alexander says that the analytic tradition made epistemology the “Queen of Philosophy,” and that much of modern analytic philosophy would be better captured by calling it “philepistemy”.⁴⁷ Similarly, Rorty identified much of the analytic tradition as “philosophy-as-epistemology.”⁴⁸ This penchant, however, is one which Dewey (and many within the pragmatist tradition) wanted to wholeheartedly avoid. Rather than framing every philosophical issue around epistemology, Dewey wanted pragmatism to be part of a much larger and more complex philosophy of *lived experience*.⁴⁹ As mentioned above, however, not everyone associated with pragmatism wanted to go in this

⁴⁴ Nevertheless, theories of truth and perception were and are, no doubt, important elements to pragmatism, as exemplified in the Peirce’s famous *pragmatist maxim*: ‘Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’ But, depending on the thinker (especially Dewey), pragmatism is much more than that and, accordingly, can be taken seriously without adopting a pragmatic theory of truth. Hilary Putnam is a well-known example of someone who was profoundly influenced by pragmatism, yet was hostile to the pragmatist maxim. For more on this see Peirce (1931-35) and Putnam (2017)

⁴⁵ William F. Lawhead, *The Philosophical Journey* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014) 267

⁴⁶ Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2013) 2

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) xiii

⁴⁹ Alexander, 2

direction. Richard Bernstein compares pragmatism to an accordion, saying it is “sometimes stretched to include a wide diversity of positions and thinkers (not just philosophers) and sometimes restricted to specific doctrines of the original American pragmatists.”⁵⁰ And Howard Mounce argued that there were “two pragmatisms,” one taking its lead from Peirce’s pragmatism, which was a scientifically-oriented tradition focused on logic, metaphysics, and epistemology, and the other taking its lead from James and Dewey, exploring, as mentioned, vast arenas of human experience, including politics, morality, religion, etc. I will be focused on the pragmatism inspired by the latter tradition.⁵¹

So, what is entailed by this Deweyan tradition of pragmatism, this tradition that incorporates such broad aspects of human experience? It will first be necessary to get clear on what is meant by experience. According to Alexander, experience can be understood in the Deweyan sense as “*culture*, our shared, embodied, symbolic life, *the meaningful ways we inhabit the world*.” And experience is viewed as *natural*; indeed, “nature” would be “manifest *most fully* in its most complex events (creating a musical composition, raising a child, falling in love, sustaining a friendship, understanding the Pythagorean theorem, or living with the loss of a loved one) rather than primarily physics.”⁵² This is a very expansive conception of experience, indeed. It is much more than mere qualia or internal introspection. And because of how expansive this conception of experience is, it incorporates much of what philosophical orthodoxy (and much of common intuition) has taken to be *external* to human experience. This is, partly, why this strain of pragmatism works at challenging traditional dichotomies. John J. Stuhr provides a useful, multi-

⁵⁰ Richard Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010) 11

⁵¹ Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, *Pragmatism as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2017) 3

⁵² Alexander, 4 [original emphasis]

faceted characterization of pragmatism that includes within it some examples of the types of dichotomies pragmatism challenges.⁵³ He writes that pragmatism involves

the rejection of the central problems of modern philosophy, which presuppose such dichotomies as percept/concept, reason/will, thought/purpose, intellect/emotion, appearance/reality, experience/nature, belief/action, theory/practice, facts/values, and self/others.

Looking at it thusly throws into sharp relief just how ambitious and radical pragmatism aims to be!⁵⁴ What's important here, though, is that pragmatism aims to strike at the heart of these central and largely-assumed dichotomies by making its subject matter *the nature of experience*—and it does so by being non-traditional in its approach to ontology and epistemology.

By focusing on and taking seriously human experience, as defined above, this reading of pragmatism is not particularly concerned with arguing for the existence of things as we intuitively think about them (e.g. outside of human perspective, as having an “untainted” reality). Rather, it is concerned with how we actively engage with, participate in, and create the world. Importantly, this builds meaningfulness into our very way of being in the world. Creatures who experience things are inherently meaning-conferring, and inescapably so. Accordingly, the world is imbued with some degree of meaning.⁵⁵

⁵³Stuhr's full characterization is as follows: (1) the rejection of the central problems of modern philosophy, which presuppose such dichotomies as percept/concept, reason/will, thought/purpose, intellect/emotion, appearance/reality, experience/nature, belief/action, theory/practice, facts/values, and self/others; (2) fallibilism, or the impossibility of attaining unrevisable, certain empirical knowledge as an irreducible dimension of the human condition; (3) pluralism of experiences, values, and meanings; (4) radical empiricism, according to which experiencing subject and experienced object constitute a primal, integral, relational unity; (5) treatment of the result of experimental inquiry as the measure of theory; (6) meliorism, the view that human action can improve the human condition; and (7) the centrality of community and the social, such that the individual is intrinsically constituted by and in her or his social relations, thus linking the attainment of individuality with the creation of community. See Stuhr (1987) and Siegfried (1996) for more.

⁵⁴ How successful it is at this goal is another question altogether

⁵⁵ This consequence of pragmatism will be expanded on in a later section.

Moreover, pragmatism presents a dynamic picture of the world, one that isn't interested in things as they are "in themselves," as in things "outside of" or independent from how they're experienced, as if they exist in a Platonic realm, or in the world of noumena, or as they would appear from a "view from nowhere." We are, accordingly, inextricably wrapped up in a practical point of view—not capable, in principle, of accessing a view from nowhere. Indeed, such an "ideal" perspective becomes somewhat conceptually confused under this reading of pragmatism. Another philosophical school of thought that takes experience as its subject matter is phenomenology, which is notorious for deploying jarring and obscure turns of phrase. As a for instance, there is much talk in phenomenology about seeing ourselves as beings-in-the-world. Though opaque, this phrase is meant to help us see human experience, our way of navigating and practically engaging with the world, as intimately wrapped up in the world around us. Pragmatism is committed to this same notion.⁵⁶ Bernstein writes that, "although 'being-in-the-world' is not an expression that any of the classical American pragmatists ever used, it beautifully articulates the pragmatic understanding of the transaction that takes place between human organisms and their environment."⁵⁷ The pragmatists might want to call us something like animals-in-nature. Our experiences are embodied and extended and constitutive and active participants in the natural world, rather than spectators set-against it.

Interestingly, part of the motivation for seeing ourselves as inextricable from the practical point of view is a commitment to viewing humans as natural. On the contrary, to see humans as

⁵⁶ Husserl, often considered the father of phenomenology, was influenced by James. And Bernstein quotes Dreyfus as saying of Heidegger that he radicalized "the insights already contained in the writings of such pragmatists as Nietzsche, Peirce, James, and Dewey". He also quotes Haugeland in saying: "I make Heidegger out to be less like Husserl and/or Sartre than is usual, and more like Dewey (and to a lesser extent) Sellars and the later Wittgenstein". See Bernstein (2010) for more.

⁵⁷ Bernstein, 20

purely “subjects” while maintaining the hope for an “objective” perspective, one that allows for something unblemished by human perspective, is to reify the intuition that we, as humans, are separate or set-above or against the natural world. This is unacceptable to the pragmatist.⁵⁸ Dewey described this tendency as another “product of the habit of isolating man and experience from nature,”⁵⁹ and it’s a tendency that has a durable pedigree. Without going into too much detail, the development of philosophical schools of thought that viewed humans as “spectators” of nature, rather than intimately embedded within it, has its seeds in Ancient thought but takes its most distinct and enduring forms following Descartes. On the Cartesian view, we are passive recipients of external stimuli which are then interpreted and constructed from within. On a dualist picture such as Descartes’, this can be considered a meeting point between the material and immaterial, where a construction of the world is projected. This is what Dennett called a “Cartesian Theater” view.⁶⁰ He says that we can imagine it as a homunculus in our brain running a tiny little theater that projects the external world, arguing that it is “the view that there is a crucial finish line or boundary somewhere in the brain, marking a place where the order of arrival equals the order of ‘presentation’ in experience because what happens there is what you are conscious of.” Dennett then goes on to say that “Many theorists would insist that they have explicitly rejected such an obviously bad idea. But [...] the persuasive imagery of the Cartesian Theater keeps coming back to haunt us—laypeople and scientists alike—even after its ghostly dualism has been denounced and exorcized.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ It’s telling that Dewey preferred to call his approach to philosophy (among other things) “cultural naturalism” rather than “pragmatism.”

⁵⁹ John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960) 233

⁶⁰ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991) 107

⁶¹ Ibid.

Such a view, and its close cousins, does indeed continue to haunt us. Framed in epistemological terms, these can broadly be considered “spectator theories of knowledge”; we come to know the world as isolated onlookers, inferring reality based on our construction of the sense data. As Descartes recognized all those centuries ago, having our access to reality as merely inferential leads us inexorably to skepticism.⁶² For pragmatists, however, we need not be global skeptics, since we are not concerned about reality “in itself.” We are, rather, part of reality—or, more appropriately, *real processes*.⁶³ Pragmatists prefer to trade in a type of fallibilism (rejecting the requirement of certainty for knowledge with the added caveat that every belief be provisional, subject to revision through experience/inquiry) rather than wholesale skepticism (a rejection of knowledge on the grounds that we lack certainty). At any rate, this notion—that we are spectators set against the world—continues to be both intuitive and popular, even taken for granted in some scientific circles. But challenging this view of ourselves as spectators above, rather than agents within, the world can have powerful philosophical and scientific reverberations.

What was provided above was a characterization of a specific strain of pragmatism and how it makes sense of us as experiencing creatures in the world. What I want to turn to now are some of the implications of such a view, and specifically some of the implications of the undermining of the subject/object divide. Bertrand Russell wrote that the “distinction of mind and matter, the contemplative ideal, and the traditional notion of ‘truth,’ all need to be radically reconsidered if the distinction of subject and object is not accepted as fundamental.”⁶⁴ This again illustrates that pragmatism’s penchant for challenging orthodox approaches to philosophical questions can have major consequences—and challenging the constructs of subject and object is no exception.

⁶² Though for Descartes he did some theological gymnastics in an attempt to avoid this

⁶³ I will say more about “process philosophy” in a later section

⁶⁴ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967) 812

2.2 Collapsing the Subject/Object Divide

In the next chapter, I will be arguing for a conception of Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment View that is supplemented by pragmatism. As already explained, Wolf's view presupposes a divide between subject and object, but nevertheless sets out to utilize elements of both a Fulfillment view and a Larger-than-Oneself view. Accordingly, Wolf's approach can be categorized as a "hybrid view" of meaning in life. Pragmatism, similarly, can be roughly considered a hybrid approach to meaning in life, since it not only utilizes elements of both subjectivity and objectivity, but makes the gap between them rather porous indeed. In fact, since pragmatism makes the subjective/objective divide so porous that it threatens its structural integrity, it might be a worry as to how it even rightfully qualifies as a hybrid view. This worry is of little concern, however, since pragmatism doesn't commit us to remain silent on any differences between our "inner" qualitative experiences and those of the "external" world. The worry for the pragmatist is that this distinction is reified or propped up as a way to come into contact with substantive or static ontological categories. The pragmatist need not pretend as if we don't experience certain aspects of the world as subjective and others as external or objective. Accordingly, I will take pragmatism as a true hybrid view, in the sense of being true to the term "hybrid." Pragmatism is a proper *blending* of subjective and objective elements, whereas Wolf's view maintains the distinction but pulls elements from both. This might be more appropriately deemed a "chimera" view rather than a hybrid view, but, at any rate, Wolf's approach and the pragmatic approach are similar enough for my purposes to both qualify as hybrid views. What's important is that *neither view confers meaning in life by exclusively appealing to either subjective or objective criteria.*

According to this flavor of pragmatism, we are active, embodied, extended, and embedded creatures. It is difficult to make sense of an “in here” and “out there” on this account because pragmatists are not concerned with what things exist, but with how things actively participate in the world. They are not, in other words, looking for permanent structures or substances in the world, nor are they interested in defining what those supposed substances would be like “in themselves,” free from the stain of human perception. Approaching these issues in an action-oriented, rather than substance-oriented fashion, commits us to blurring the line between subject and object. Take, for instance, walking. When someone takes a stroll, it would not make a lot of sense to talk about where the walking is, as if it was a substance or unchanging entity that we could point to. Rather, it is a *process*, an activity that is actively occurring as a result of an interaction with creature and environment.

Just as walking is a verb rather than a noun, pragmatism encourages us to think about ourselves, and our way of being, in a similarly verb-ish manner. This, accordingly, qualifies pragmatism (or at least this reading of pragmatism) as an example of a *process philosophy*. Whereas much of Western philosophy has historically been very concerned with describing substances, with demarcating what exists, what’s primary, from what doesn’t exist, process philosophy dissolves these issues in favor of viewing things as dynamic and changing and becoming. According to the SEP, “In contrast to the substance-metaphysical snapshot view of reality, with its typical focus on eternalist being and on *what there is*, process philosophers analyze becoming and *what is occurring* as well as *ways of occurring*.”⁶⁵ This, as should be clear by now, comports quite nicely with pragmatism, with its eschewing of traditional ontology and epistemology.

⁶⁵ Johanna Seibt, “Process Philosophy,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/process-philosophy/>

Thus, our minds and our experiences and our identities are not one type of entity while the environment and the world around us is another. Things are far messier than that. “Reality,” said Hilary Putnam, “does not consist of two radically different sorts of things—subjects and objects—with a problematic relation. Rather, it consists of the data—the phenomena—and it is just that these can be thought about in different ways.”⁶⁶ This last part mentioned by Putnam—that we can think about subjects and objects in different ways—is important. While pragmatism challenges ontological distinctions between subject and object, it does not further commit us to remain silent on differences. As already mentioned, to talk as if there are distinctions can be a useful heuristic (like our continuing to say that the sun rises and sets, though the Earth’s motion is responsible for that perception).

In Wolf’s terms, for example, we can, to a certain degree, *make sense* of what’s she’s getting at when defining objective as outside of ourselves. This notion is not rendered unintelligible. What is important to avoid, however, is the reification of the divide between subject and object. This avoidance of reification can be thought of as an extension of the pragmatist’s commitment to a “continuity thesis.” Put simply, this is the idea that there are no radical jumps in natural functioning. Our experiences, in other words, are continuous with nature. So, while we can usefully appeal to subject and object, it’s important to do so carefully, with explicit caveats and qualifications.

There remains the worry, however, how such a view prevents a slide into radical subjectivism. After all, if we are forever wrapped up in experience, then what distinguishes such a view from, say, idealism? If our way of being in the world is inescapably experiential, then why posit an external world at all? It’s nice to stake a claim in fallibilism rather than skepticism, but it’s not clear why or

⁶⁶ Putnam, 145

how pragmatism prevents such a slide. It's important to remember here, however, that the pragmatist is challenging our entrenched notions of spectator knowledge. Even traditional approaches to empiricism, including, for instance, Bishop Berkeley's Idealism, get off the ground by appealing to traditional ideas of correspondence. But for the pragmatist, skepticism and idealism don't work because we are not *inferring* the "objective" or "external" world. We are part of it. And this avoidance of radical subjectivism is important because it is what prevents pragmatism from being merely a type of simplistic relativism. Pragmatists want to thread the needle between seeing reality as inescapably experiential and reality being purely relative to the subject; this view does not lead to the idea that we each construct our own reality, leaving us no tools for commensurability or justification or truth. I will expand on the worry that pragmatism is just subjectivism by another name in a later section. But, again, pragmatism is not monolithic on this issue, and there are a variety of responses.⁶⁷

At any rate, it tends to be broadly accepted that, through our embeddedness in nature, and by merit of our practical and social ways of being, skepticism and radical subjectivism are able to be avoided. Disagreements can be adjudicated by, for instance, social agreement and practical utility. The world presents itself to us, as humans, as inherently social and practical, and it is through this presentation that we can appeal for navigation purposes. Moreover, pragmatism tries to break away from radical subjectivism by looking to our experience of the world around us, which is, in so many ways, *not radically subjective*. Our experiences are frequently "butting up" against a world that constrains our abilities and understandings. We must navigate a world that is in flux. It can be dangerous and mercurial and random—all in spite of our expectations or beliefs. If I maintain a

⁶⁷ A well-known divide between Putnam and Rorty, for instance, opens from this issue. Rorty argued that intersubjective justification was the only game in town, while Putnam wanted to maintain talk of truth. See Rorty (1982) and Putnam (2017) for more.

belief that I can fly when I jump from building tops, I will be very disappointed (and dead) once I see that reality is indifferent to those beliefs. Peirce called this “the Outward Clash.”⁶⁸ In short, a radically subjective view fails to accurately capture lived experience because we exist within a shared world, *a shared world that consists of more than mere subjective attitudes.*

2.3 Summary

Now that I have led us sufficiently astray, it is time to return to the topic from which our journey began: meaning in life. I spent the first chapter laying out the details of popular and intuitive approaches to the question of meaning in life, as well as Susan Wolf’s expansion upon those intuitions, i.e. the Fulfillment View and the Larger-than-Life View. I then detailed Susan Wolf’s preferred strategy, viz. the Fitting Fulfillment View. Wolf’s view can be pithily summarized as “meaning in life obtains when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.” I showed that Wolf nebulously appeals to an ideal-observer to fill out the details as to what would constitute “objective attractiveness.” I then mentioned that Wolf’s view would be better served by appealing to certain strains of pragmatist philosophy; that is, that pragmatism can help fill out the details for Wolf’s use of “fittingness,” “worthiness,” and “attractiveness.” In order to make sense of my claim, I needed to get clear on what I meant by “pragmatism,” a notoriously inscrutable term. I provided a brief history of the tradition and explained what portions or strains of pragmatism I would be exploiting for my project. This includes a focus on the Deweyan tradition of pragmatism that is broadly experiential in nature, which sees us as practically-involved and embedded creatures, which in turn helps to undermine the historically presupposed subject/object divide. Collapsing the subject/object divide will open up space for constructing “worthy” or “attractive” pursuits without appealing to objective criterion or falling into mere subjectivism. With all of these tools at our

⁶⁸ Bernstein, 46

disposal, I now want to return to Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment View and interpret it in light of these elements of pragmatism.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PRAGMATIC FULFILLMENT VIEW

3.1 Haidt and the Flow State

The previous chapter provided a picture of what we are like as creatures, and more specifically how integral and inescapable experience is to our way of engaging with and navigating within the world. This picture was not traditionally ontological or epistemological, focused more on our ways of practical engagement rather than what things are like in themselves or with how the world corresponded with our claims or beliefs. Within such a framework, the subject/object divide isn't doing much work. Nevertheless, we are still presented with a picture of humans as meaningful creatures, replete with beliefs and desires and evaluative attitudes. So how do we square this picture of pragmatism with Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment View as explained above?

I want to start by looking again at the subjective element of Wolf's view, i.e. fulfillment. This is the notion that a life is meaningful to the extent that one feels or believes herself to be fulfilled. The Satisfied Sisyphus was the archetype used here. Part of the worry for such a view is that it would be far too permissive for meaningful lives. Recall that this would allow for a life to be meaningful even if it was spent picking bellybutton lint or sadistically torturing adorable bunnies, providing that the agent derived sufficient or satisfactory amounts of fulfillment from such pursuits. This allowance is partly what compels Wolf to build in an objective component to her account. One's pursuits and passions must be geared toward the appropriate or worthy kinds of activities in order to qualify as meaningful.

There is, however, a potential guard against the over-permissiveness of the subjective Fulfillment View. It's one thing to be concerned about those instances of fulfilled bellybutton-

pickers and contented sadists, but what if, in practice, such cases were not able to arise? In other words, what if it were the case that bellybutton-pickers and sadists failed to live meaningful lives not because they didn't meet an objective criterion, but because humans aren't, by our very nature, the types of creatures that can live meaningfully through such undertakings? If it were the case that meaning could only arise through the pursuit of certain kinds of tasks, then a purely subjective account of meaning might not be too permissive after all. It would, perhaps, remain too permissive in theory, but not in practice. Under such assumptions, if there were truly fulfilled bellybutton-pickers, then they would qualify for a meaningful life; but there aren't truly fulfilled bellybutton-pickers because, by our very nature, we wouldn't—indeed, *couldn't*—derive fulfillment from such an activity.

As it so happens, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt proposes just such a thing. In reply to Wolf, Haidt argues that there is no need for an objective standard for meaning in life since only certain types of pursuits can satisfy the demands of meaningfulness. In other words, the *worthiness* of an activity is built into our natures as humans. Haidt writes of Wolf, “I suspect that she fears that if there is no such things as objective value, then meaning-relativism will prevail, and lawn mower racing, flagpole sitting, and rock rolling will have just as strong a claim to being meaningful as writing a symphony or righting an injustice.”⁶⁹ This does indeed seem to be Wolf's worry. But Haidt argues that this worry is misplaced. As Haidt notes, Wolf is committed to the idea that “Meaning [...] comes from active engagement in projects of worth, which links us to our world in a positive way.”⁷⁰ But, Haidt continues, only *certain activities*, worthy or not, offer the potential for active engagement and linking us to the world in a positive way.

⁶⁹ Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, 96

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 95

To make sense of this, Haidt appeals to two psychological concepts: *vital engagement* and *hive psychology*. He argues that Wolf's use of "active engagement" is quite close to that of vital engagement. Haidt says that vital engagement is when psychological "flow" meets subjective designations of significance. "Flow," says Haidt, is a state that "results when you are completely immersed in an activity that is challenging, yet closely matched to your abilities."⁷¹ He lists examples of activities that are conducive to flow, including painting, dancing, writing, and driving on a winding road. Vital engagement will emerge through these activities as a person weaves "an ever more encompassing web of knowledge, action, identity, and relationships."⁷² Haidt is sure to point out, though, that flow is a type of "deep interest," distinct from vital engagement, which, on his account also requires the subjective element of ascribed significance or fulfillment.⁷³

The primary point here for Haidt is that only certain activities will be conducive to vital engagement. We need not, in other words, worry about Satisfied Sisyphus and the contented sadists. Vital engagement comes to Wolf's rescue, says Haidt, because "*Lawn mower racing and flagpole sitting do not lend themselves to vital engagement,*"⁷⁴ and thus do not lend themselves to meaningful lives. Like Wolf, Haidt doesn't want to deny that such activities can still have their place, can still be valuable or rational in certain respects, but not in the respect of meaningfulness. After all, asks Haidt, how many of these folks who pursue such activities—bellyputton pickers and lawn mower racers and flagpole sitters—found flow in their pursuit? How many

devoured all the books they could find on the history of lawn mowers and flagpoles, lovingly assembled collections of lawn mowers and flagpoles, and chose colleges and

⁷¹ Ibid. 94

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. [emphasis in original]

jobs so as to ensure that they would always be able to race mowers or sit on poles in the company of other mower racers and pole sitters?⁷⁵

The answer to these rhetorical questions is, presumably, close to none. Thus, according to Haidt, the subjective element is all that's needed. It won't be too permissive or arbitrary due to the types of creatures we are and the ways in which we engage with the world.

Haidt attempts to further augment Wolf's account by appealing to our "ultrasocial" natures. Haidt agrees with Wolf that we need the Larger-than-Oneself element in order to live meaningful lives. But Haidt disagrees with Wolf that this is objective or as simple as appealing to something "outside" of ourselves. He thinks that we should interpret the notion more literally, stressing the need to connect with something that is actually larger than oneself or any individual. By seeing the human species as inherently and profoundly social, to such a degree that we are in this respect more like hive species (such as bees and ants) than tribal species (such as our closest genetic relatives, the chimpanzees), we are reminded of our need to connect with each other on the largest of scales. Haidt encourages us to challenge to the Western notion of viewing humans as atomistic, and instead think of the fundamental unit of society as the group. "From the perspective of hive psychology, size matters a great deal. From the perspective of hive psychology, modern humans are essentially bees who busted out of the hive during the Enlightenment, and who burned down the last honeycombs during the twentieth century... [But] a good hive must be larger than oneself."⁷⁶ Thus, once again, Haidt appeals to our natures to work as natural constraints on our ability to live meaningful lives. The permissiveness of the Fulfillment View is constricted by the types of creatures we are, rather than qualifications built into the theory itself.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 97

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 100

I think that Haidt is onto something here, and I want to use his framing of the issue to help motivate the work that pragmatism will do for Wolf's view. The move that Haidt makes in appealing to human nature is relevantly similar to the move that I will make with pragmatism. Notice, however, that in making this move, Haidt continues to appeal to the subject/object divide. Haidt thinks that Wolf's desire for an objective standard is doomed to fail. We should, instead, just accept the view as inherently subjective and be okay with it. "Wolf bets everything on the existence, or at least intelligibility, of objective value. I would bet against her," says Haidt.⁷⁷ As mentioned, Haidt boils Wolf's worries down to a fear of relativism. But Haidt's willingness to bite the bullet on subjectivity, which leaves him open to an array of difficult counterexamples, still presupposes the subject/object divide. Pragmatism, however, can appeal to the types of creatures we are as a way to help constrict the permissiveness of the fulfillment view, without collapsing into pure subjectivity.

3.2 Avoiding Pure Subjectivity

As explained in the previous section, Haidt argues that Wolf's view does not need to appeal to an objective dimension for meaning in life to obtain. All we need is the subjective dimension—but, says Haidt, we are nevertheless saved from worrisome permissiveness due to being constrained by the types of creatures we happen to be. What's important to note here is that Haidt is maintaining the subject/object framework from which Wolf develops her view. He simply concedes that all that is of concern when evaluating meaning in life is our subjective reports/qualitative experiences. Thus, his view is of the radical subjective sort. However, I want to try to make sense of Wolf's view and Haidt's argument in light of pragmatism, which undermines the subject/object divide from the start. I want to argue for a conception of meaning in life that does not strictly appeal to

⁷⁷ Ibid. 96

subjective or objective criteria. In order to make sense of such a view, I will be pulling from Dewey and his notions of valuing vs. evaluation.

Mentioned in the previous chapter was the worry that pragmatism, despite claims to the contrary, is really just a dressed-up version of radical subjectivism. Indeed, no less than Bertrand Russell described pragmatism as “a form of subjectivistic madness.”⁷⁸⁷⁹ Pragmatists would, to varying degrees, deny this claim, due in no small part to their resistance to trading in the language of subjectivity and objectivity. But, resistance to an accusation does not equate successful avoidance of it. I want to, therefore, spend some time exploring how pragmatism tries to avoid collapsing into radical subjectivism.

As I explained above, pragmatism, broadly speaking, functions as a process philosophy and, thus, does not maintain interest in traditional substance ontology. As it so happens, however, our notions of subject and object are examples of such substance ontology, viewing humans as one substance, and the external world as separate substances. But it is not merely that such a view reifies our subjective self and a separate external reality. It also makes trouble for our notions of meaning in life. Pragmatists would want to avoid the subject/object divide not only because of its problematic ontology, but also because it fails to take seriously important aspects of how we determine meaningfulness in life. To get clear on what I mean by this, I want to again look at purely subjective accounts of meaning, even sophisticated ones such as Haidt’s. This view states that what makes a life meaningful is that one feels or believes that it is meaningful. There is nothing more to it. Haidt may attempt to constrain that criterion by examining our human

⁷⁸ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967) 818

⁷⁹ According to Louis Menand, Russell’s criticisms of pragmatism were ‘so intemperate that he earned the distinction of being one of the few people known to have provoked Dewey to express irritation. ‘You know, he gets me sore,’ Dewey said.’ See Menand (2001) 375

natures, but it is nonetheless purely subjective. Haidt argues that we can't actually feel as though life is meaningful unless we are engaged in certain tasks. These tasks aren't objectively meaningful in the kinds of ways that Wolf wants, though. Rather, it is simply that these are the types of tasks that are wont to give rise to the appropriate qualitative experiences of meaningfulness. Again, the two constraints that Haidt mentions are our penchant for vital engagement and our social natures.

Interestingly, though Haidt appeals to the social dimension of human nature as a constraint on our qualitative experience, he doesn't view this as objective in the way that Wolf wants it to be. This is, presumably, because the locus of meaning still ultimately falls on the beliefs and feelings of the specific, individual agent. Thus, Haidt's view fails to take into account the role of *collective judgments* in terms of the meaningfulness of lives. So, while Haidt makes sure to mention our social natures as a constraint on what we can find subjectively meaningful, he doesn't allow for social attitudes to be partly constitutive of meaningfulness. And this is a consequence of any purely subjective view. Wolf's approach, conversely, leaves open the possibility for intersubjective judgments to play a role in determining meaningfulness in life since she builds in the objective criterion. This means that our collective judgments, as a group or a society or a species, can be pertinent in determining a meaningful life. On a subjective account, however, such collective judgments are irrelevant unless they contribute to an individual agent's qualitative experience of meaningfulness.

Wolf wants to utilize paradigm cases of meaningful lives in order to help us get a sense of what should be considered meaningful. Many of these lives that are broadly considered meaningful would not have been considered especially meaningful by the people themselves, however. Wolf cites Tolstoy here as a particularly salient example of someone who most would consider to have

lived an extremely meaningful life, but nonetheless personally felt as though his life was meaningless.⁸⁰ All pure subjectivists, Haidt included, would have to conclude that Tolstoy's life was indeed meaningless, since that is how he personally felt it to be. As Wolf argues, this doesn't seem quite right. It seems, rather, that Tolstoy's life was still profoundly meaningful, and in no small part because of his great contributions to literature that have inspired and encouraged countless folks over the past century. For Wolf, she makes sense of this by appealing to an objective criterion, to the notion that Tolstoy was contributing to something larger or outside of himself. How can the pragmatist make sense of this without appealing to those same constructs?

I will argue that pragmatism (again, this specific Deweyan reading of pragmatism) can make sense of the meaningfulness of lives without appealing to the constructs of objective and subjective. As I argued in the previous paragraphs, despite pragmatism's commitment to maintaining a process- and experience-oriented understanding of the world, this does not further commit the pragmatist to being 'locked up' inside the subjective experience of a single agent. I will now turn to filling out some of the details of how this pragmatic account can make sense of a worthiness condition.

3.3 Dewey and Evaluations of Meaning in Life

In what follows I will be making use of John Dewey's metaethical distinction between valuing and evaluation. Despite the fact that Dewey's use of valuing and evaluation were broadly metaethical—concerned with values in general—I want to restrict these terms to meaning in life. Thus, whenever there is talk about values in general, it's important to keep in mind that I am speaking specifically about meaning in life, and, accordingly, setting aside any more expansive metaethical issues for the sake of this current project.

⁸⁰ Wolf, *Variety of Values*, 105-106

Throughout his sprawling and prolific career, Dewey wrote extensively on the issue of value, and made much use of the distinction between valuing and evaluation. He variously referred to this distinction as “prizing” vs. “appraising,” or “esteeming” vs. “estimating,” and, according to the SEP, “sometimes used the ambiguous term ‘valuation’ to cover both valuing and evaluation.”⁸¹ This distinction is considered “the fundamental psychological distinction needed to ground Dewey's metaethics.”⁸² Recall that for Dewey we are deeply active, action-oriented creatures. Accordingly, we exist in this world in a state of action, moving around, grabbing at things, gravitating toward things, repelling from other things. And this tendency starts from our earliest age, though in much more primitive and non-cognitive (non-propositional) states, what Dewey called “affective-motor attitudes.”⁸³ We move toward, touch, ingest, acquire, avoid, reject, or spew out things depending on what kind of attitude is elicited, oftentimes without having any idea of why or what we are valuing.⁸⁴ Such attitudes are exemplified in exclamations like “yippee!” or “whoa!” or “yuck!” This non-reflective, largely automatic propensity is “a matter of loving, cherishing, holding dear, or, negatively, hating or despising something, where these attitudes inherently involve tendencies to act.”⁸⁵ This basic tendency is what Dewey deemed “valuing” (or prizing or esteeming).

Our propensity for such affective-motor attitudes, argued Dewey, is what plants the seed for further, more reflective and fleshed-out evaluative judgments. As a result of the ability to reflect upon the consequences of behavior, and to consider alternatives and solutions to problems, we can develop what Dewey called “evaluations.” Evaluations are explicitly cognitive states with

⁸¹ Elizabeth Anderson “Dewey's Moral Philosophy”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/dewey-moral/>

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

representational content. They are also practical in nature, aimed at altering or guiding our behaviors, with “ends-in-view,” i.e. dynamic practical intentions or plans to resolve current predicaments. This process, then, will result in new valuing. For Dewey, this process—what he called ‘the scientific method’⁸⁶—can involve a variety of strategies.

Dewey would want the specific means for arriving at evaluations to remain open and flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. The traditional philosophical approaches to answering value-laden quandaries—e.g. ethical quandaries—has often involved an abstract or universal rule that can be applied to specific circumstances, or perhaps an algorithm that would allow us to plug in the relevant variables in order to get a concrete answer to our problem. Dewey was explicitly avoidant of this. He didn’t want to construct universal rules or algorithms for our difficult situations precisely because rules are simplistic abstractions while experience is complex and challenging and mutable. As Mark Johnson points out (and Dewey repeatedly observed), “one of the great mistakes of so many moral theories is their failure to start from *experience as it is lived*” leading us to abstractions that can “oversimplify by directing us away from the complexity and richness of our actual lived situation.”⁸⁷ Appealing to such abstractions can, in turn, lead us to pick our preferred “rules” and miss the pertinent details and overlook what is actually happening in the situation at hand. Dewey, conversely, wanted his approach to such situations to be as dynamic and experientially-oriented as the problems themselves. Once it is admitted that there are better and worse ways to resolve human predicaments and quandaries, then myriad strategies are called-for to resolve said quandaries. This scientific method for resolving predicaments and quandaries—or what Dewey called problematic situations—could include appealing to, among other things,

⁸⁶ Bernstein, 164

⁸⁷ Mark Johnson, *Morality For Humans* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014) 94

“experimentation, imaginative construction of alternative hypotheses, open discussion, debate, and ongoing self-corrective communal criticism.”⁸⁸ Dewey’s scientific method, according to Putnam, is simply “experimental inquiry combined with free and full discussion—which means, in the case of social problems, *the maximum use of the capacities of citizens for proposing courses of action, for testing them, and for evaluating the results.*”⁸⁹

So, when would such experimental inquiry be of use? Under what circumstances would Dewey argue that we ought to exploit his scientific method and implement means such as imaginative hypotheses and discussion and communal criticism? Such means would be most salient in those abovementioned problematic situations. We are confronted with problematic situations whenever our ordinary, habitual ways of living are jarred loose and we must try to figure out how best to proceed. Figuring out how to proceed might involve a type of moral reasoning. Johnson characterizes the process of moral reasoning, under which Dewey’s scientific method and evaluations fall, in the following way:

Moral reasoning is a multistage process of experiential reconfiguration. It begins with a situation in which our prior habits of thought and action are experienced as inadequate for dealing with new conditions that have arisen within our situation. This sense of inadequacy is felt as a tension, conflict, or frustration. Your habitual modes of response and action are not fitted to the changing circumstances, and it is not clear how you should proceed.⁹⁰

This happens whenever we struggle to know or do the right thing, how to adequately navigate the world. This might happen when we are, say, conflicted on whether or not we ought to call-out Uncle Chad for his microaggressions during a family dinner, or to blow up a dam to protect the environment, or to develop strategies to systematically undermine the capitalist machine, or to

⁸⁸ Bernstein, 164

⁸⁹ Ibid. [my italics]

⁹⁰ Johnson, 103

resolve an existential crisis and figure out how to live with more meaning. It is in such scenarios where we are suddenly faced with ambiguity, bewilderment, tension, indecision, or hesitation that we must appeal to means for resolving the quandary and decide how to proceed. It is then that we deploy Dewey's scientific method and appeal to a variety of strategies in the hope of arriving at effective and practical resolutions, both individually and collectively.⁹¹ The test for how well such methods are working is in seeing how effectively it's resolving the problematic situation at hand.⁹² The key for efficacious use of Dewey's scientific method, and any moral inquiry, says Johnson, is to "grasp the problematic situation in all its breadth, depth, complexity, and richness, and then to respond intelligently to that situation as a way of reconstructing it for the better."⁹³

Thus, Dewey utilized these concepts to help makes sense of a difference between our basic, automatic emotional and affective attitudes and our reflective, practical, and sophisticated judgments about our initial attitudes. Our values, then, are both emotionally-based and behavior-guiding, but still capable of possessing propositional content. Importantly, Dewey develops this metaethic without appealing to notions of objectivity or subjectivity. Moreover, since this is a metaethical view, rather than a normative one, it is largely silent on what the content or conclusions would be for this constructive process. And a constructive process it is, as Dewey's view can be seen as a proto-metaethical constructivism. In fact, seeing the parallels between Dewey's view and that of some forms of constructivism (specifically Humean forms) can further elucidate what is involved in the process of evaluation.

⁹¹ I will expand on this experimental/scientific approach to problematic situations in the following section

⁹² We know that a problematical situation is resolved, according to Johnson, is that "we feel or experience the transformation of the situation from one that is problematic, indeterminate, and conflicted to a situation that is clarified, harmonized, and unified in a way that carries us forward in life." See Johnson (2014) for more.

⁹³ Ibid. 99

As Pierre-Luc Dostie Proulx argues, Dewey's view is a precursor to Sharon Street's well-known version of metaethical constructivism.⁹⁴ What's of particular interest here is Street's use of the so-called "practical point of view," which is considered to "emphasize some of the most fundamental characteristics of constructivism."⁹⁵ The practical point of view is defined by Street as "the point of view occupied by any creature who takes at least some things in the world to be good or bad, better or worse, required or optional, worthy or worthless, and so on—the standpoint of a being who judges."⁹⁶ According to Streetian flavors of constructivism, our values are determined through a constructive process after adopting the practical point of view and recognizing what is logically and instrumentally entailed as a result. Notice, however, that for the pragmatist, we are creatures who are always engaged in a practical point of view. This is not a position that we can adopt, so much as one from which we cannot escape, as our experience of the world is always already *axiologically charged*. As mentioned in a previous section, experience is inherently imbued with some degree of meaningfulness. James had a goal of making this point explicit, stating that he wanted people to "feel how soaked and shot-through life is with values and meanings."⁹⁷

Under such a view, when we engage in a process of expounding upon valuations into full-fledged evaluations, we are looking at what is instrumentally entailed for us based on the types of creatures we already are. We do not move from a value-neutral realm of facts to a value-laden practical point of view in order to determine moral truths; rather, we are already involved in such a process to varying degrees. For Dewey, evaluations are sophisticated improvements upon what is already present in nascent and underdeveloped forms.

⁹⁴ Pierre-Luc Dostie Proulx, "Early Forms of Metaethical Constructivism in John Dewey's Pragmatism," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 4, no. 9 (2016): 1-14

⁹⁵ Ibid. 2

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Bernstein, 63

The parallels between Dewey's view and Street's constructivism have two important implications for what follows. One, as Proulx points out, is that such a view distinguishes itself from mere subjectivism (or "subjectivist projectivism," as Proulx calls it⁹⁸) by factoring in "collective evaluations," as well as external constraints; and, two, that neither Dewey's evaluations nor Street's constructivism entail unavoidable obligations, and are thus contingent and malleable in the face of changing and evolving circumstances. The lack of unavoidable obligations means that Dewey's view and Humean constructivisms share a potentially worrisome consequence, viz. the logical possibility of an "ideally coherent Caligula." Basically, what this means is that there is nothing necessarily preventing the possibility of a sadistic psychopath (such as Caligula) from living a moral (or in this case a meaningful) existence, so long as they are factoring in the right kinds of facts, adopting the practical point of view, and acting in accord with what's logically and practically entailed. Nothing is rendering it necessarily (either logically or metaphysically) impossible for such a person to exist.

This, I think, would be acceptable for Dewey—a feature rather than a bug for his view. Dewey would want to leave open such possibilities so as to be in accord with his action-oriented and contingent notion of "ends-in-view" (more on that soon). Nevertheless, Dewey, like Haidt, would not be overly concerned with the possibility of Caligula living a particularly meaningful life, since Caligula will still be faced with the constraints of the real world, with the Outward Clash. As it stands, living a life committed to indiscriminately inflicting misery on others is not a strategy for maximizing meaningfulness, not for the individual and especially not in collective judgment. Since Dewey would not appeal to a strongly objective standard of meaningfulness, one that exists fixed and unchanging irrespective of experience, then the possibility of a coherent Caligula comes with

⁹⁸ Proulx, 3

the territory. But while Dewey (and Street) would be okay with this, it should be noted that Wolf would find the notion that Caligula's life has some degree of meaning, and that it's an open possibility for such a life to be richly meaningful, to be deeply troubling and outside the spirit of her Fitting Fulfillment View. This demonstrates perhaps the greatest conflict with and departure from Wolf that my view presents.

At any rate, these aspects of Dewey's view (flexibility and non-subjectivity) are why I drew attention to the similarities to constructivism, as they will play an important role in establishing why pragmatism aids in filling out the worthiness condition for meaning in life. There are, however, significant distinctions between the views of Street and Dewey. It's important to note, for instance, that while neither view entails unavoidable obligations, Dewey's view functions (as mentioned) from what he calls "ends-in-view," which is an active process wherein ends and means are mutually creative and reinforcing of one another. Dewey argued that one's ends can't be fully realized until the task (and thus means) is undertaken and practically pursued, which frequently forces shifts in both the means and ends. Street writes of a more static process wherein one takes into account all relevant non-moral facts and adopts the practical point of view in order to determine what is logically and instrumentally entailed. As a result, the entailments "fall out" from this process. This means Street's approach is in the spirit of the algorithmic approach to moral quandaries mentioned above. For Dewey, the process is much more dynamic and engaged, with the meanings and entailments changing and constituting one another in turn. There is not a "terminal point" for conceived ends, nothing that is "external to the conditions that have led up to [any ends]." They are, rather, "the continually developing meaning of present tendencies."⁹⁹ The

⁹⁹ John Dewey, "Existence, Value and Criticism" in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, edited by John J. McDermott. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981) 313

entailments, in other words, can't be fully seen or understood until practical engagement commences. Differences aside, seeing Dewey's view in a constructivist light can help in understanding what he's up to. And what's of particular importance for now is that both are sensitive to a plurality of views, contingencies, and changing circumstances, all of which will aid in making sense of the Pragmatic Fulfillment View.

3.4 Filling Out the Pragmatic Fulfillment View

As argued above, a pragmatic approach to meaning in life attempts to steer clear of objective and subjective constructs. Without these constructs, however, it is not obvious how the view can make sense of a worthiness condition in assessing the value of certain pursuits in life. A purely subjectivist view avoids the baggage of a worthiness condition by simply appealing to our qualitative assessment of meaning in life. For Wolf, this is far too permissive. Enter Haidt, who argues that the permissiveness can be restricted by looking at what types of creatures we are. This, however, would be an unsatisfactory response for Wolf since she appeals to exemplars of meaning in life to act as guideposts, and there are examples of people who have lived what we would *want* to call meaningful lives, despite the agents themselves denying its meaningfulness. The subjectivist would just have to concede that their life failed to be meaningful, despite the collective judgments of its meaningfulness. I then laid out some of the basic details of Dewey's pragmatic metaethic, which appealed to primitive valuing and sophisticated evaluations as a way to make sense of different levels of values.

Let's now look at how Dewey's metaethical view can be translated to meaning in life. For Dewey, evaluative judgments occur through the transformation of valuing—*that is*, evaluative judgments are rendered through a type of constructive process stemming from basic valuing.

Determining meaning in life can, I think, occur through an analogous process. We can take primitive, non-reflective attitudes that are related to meaning in life—e.g. positive emotions such as happiness and fulfillment—to be the raw material that can be further developed into deeper meaning in life. Where Dewey wants to use basic affective-motor attitudes as the basis for full-blown ethical claims, I want to limit the affective-motor attitudes in question to those that are related to or have bearing upon meaningfulness in life. I want to leave open exactly what kinds of primitive attitudes are relevant to meaningfulness, since I think it can be pretty broad, blurry, and not easily parsed out. What I'm talking about here though are those basic attitudes that would be broadly considered to compose a sense of meaningfulness, e.g. the emotions that are felt while one participates in an activity that they would deem to have conferred much meaning in their life.

From there, in the same way that Dewey proposes a constructive process of evaluation, deeper levels of meaning—sophisticated, cognitive forms of meaning—can be developed. As mentioned above, this process would involve an active engagement with the primitive attitudes of meaningfulness, where, after facing a problematic situation, an ends-in-view is conceived, and steps are taken to further pursue, develop, or entrench that sense of meaningfulness. Rather than just basic, brute attitudes of meaningfulness, this constructive process will result in practical, full-fledged evaluations of meaning, as well as sophisticated strategies for maintaining and pursuing meaning in life. Just as Dewey proposes pluralistic means to pursue such ends, this, too, would allow for a variety of means to develop meaning in life. It moves from basic valuations of meaningfulness to sophisticated evaluations of meaningfulness through an engagement with, among other things, imagined exemplars, collective judgments, and long-term consequences. Thus, it is through this pluralistic and flexible evaluative process that the worthiness of pursuits can be

assessed. While Wolf appeals to impartial observers and exemplars of meaningfulness to help guide us toward what counts as a worthy pursuit, Dewey's approach subsumes Wolf's as a relevant variable, as one strategy among many, in assessing and guiding the worthiness of a pursuit. The evaluation process can appeal to exemplars of meaningfulness as important considerations but can also appeal to other considerations for a more sophisticated and practical assessment of meaningfulness. Most importantly, as mentioned above, this process would entail considerations of collective evaluations in assessing meaningfulness. This is vital in demarcating a Pragmatic Fulfillment View from a mere subjective fulfillment view.

Perhaps an example will prove elucidating. I want to begin with a classic problematic situation vis-à-vis meaning in life—namely, existential crises. An existential crisis might be the quintessence of a problematic situation when we are trying to live life with meaning. Life is going along—with its ups and downs, no doubt—but nevertheless possessing a general ease of momentum and sense of purpose. That is, until one day we stop and look around and say, “What’s the point? Why am I doing what I’m doing? Does it matter? *Does any of this mean anything?*” Ah, yes. We are now firmly planted in the garden of problematic situations. This is where Dewey’s process of evaluation, the deployment of experimental inquiry, can come to the rescue. Our ordinary, habitual way of doing things is no longer working. We must turn to alternatives, we must experiment and explore and inquire in order to escape from or resolve this predicament. So, how can we do that? Well, we can imagine what other trajectories our lives could take that might be more meaningful. We can meditate on our discontent. We might talk to our friends and family and see how they find meaning. We can talk to strangers, we can see therapists, try out medications, try out new hobbies. We might, as Wolf proposes, turn to literature and history and look at the extraordinary lives of

our heroes and attempt to follow suit. We can look at the existential crises of literary figures—e.g. Arjuna, Hamlet, Zarathustra, Roquentin, Sethe—as well as historical figures—e.g. Siddhārtha, Woolf, Frankl, Ellison, or Beauvoir. There is no shortage of folks who have faced a crisis of meaning head-on. Such strategies would all fall under Dewey’s scientific method, where we are actively engaging and experimenting with our world. In doing so, we are setting out on a path to resolve our existential crisis, to amplify the meaning in our lives. Notably, we are not merely appealing to our qualitative assessment since we are factoring in the evaluations of others. We are, in other words, looking at the *situation* rather than just our internal qualia. Moreover, we are not merely looking for a meaning “out there,” as if it is this ontologically distinct substance that we might find underneath our pillow or something. Meaning is not locked up inside of us, nor is it a static substance waiting for us to unearth. Meaning occurs through a dynamic and engaged constructive process, where we, as creatures embedded in nature, learn to more effectively navigate our shared world, our shared experiential horizon of meaning. The problematic situation—i.e. the existential crisis—is being confronted and attempted to be resolved; we know it is resolved or alleviated when we are no longer in crisis.

Again, to be clear here, what’s involved in the constructive process of meaningfulness is complex. It doesn’t appeal to prior or pre-existing notions of worthiness that are being uncovered. By deconstructing the subject/object divide, the pragmatic view is not in the business of appealing to tasks or pursuits that are “worthy” or “attractive” independently of any creature’s experience. This type of standard, a standard of strong objectivity, is conceptually confused when the subject/object divide is challenged. The pragmatic view, accordingly, is concerned with a constructive process for determining or (contingently) fixing standards of worthiness, rather than

“tracking” or “uncovering” the worthiness of a task as if it exists in some separate realm or ontological category. This is, again, why the pragmatic view is making more than mere epistemic claims. It is a constructive process that is action-guiding, that appeals to a variety of standards and strategies (e.g. social and individual) for solving the “problem” of meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is thus capable of being amplified through this complex and intersubjective process.

This is the Pragmatic Fulfillment View. It maintains that the meaningfulness of one’s life can be assessed and guided through an evaluation process in similar ways that Dewey advocates for ethics. This evaluation process aims to help determine what kinds of activities and engagements are conducive to meaningfulness and how to best incorporate and pursue those in one’s own life. Engagements that are more conducive to meaningfulness, that are more competent at confronting and meliorating problematical situations are those that are evaluated as being worthier. Thus, Wolf’s worrisome worthiness condition, rather than existing as a troublesome ontological category, becomes a practical problem that can be improved upon. This process might seem needlessly convoluted compared to Wolf’s account, but as I aim to show in the final section, there are distinct benefits to this approach that, despite the complexity, demonstrate an improvement over Wolf’s view as it currently stands. The major benefits to this Pragmatic Fulfillment View are that it is more action-guiding, that worthiness and meaningfulness come in degrees, and that as a result the view is more inclusive.

3.5 Advantages for the Pragmatic Fulfillment View

In every framework discussed thus far there has been a threshold for determining whether or not a life is meaningful. On the subjectivist account, a life is meaningless unless it has the appropriate qualitative character. On the objectivist account, a life is meaningless unless it

appropriately contributes to something larger-than- or outside-of-oneself. On Wolf's account, a life is meaningless unless it appropriately welds subjective attraction and objective attractiveness. In each case, the subject/object divide is presupposed and exploited in such a way that certain criteria are required to be met in order for a life to be meaningful. The Pragmatic Fulfillment View, however, undermines the subject/object divide and views meaningfulness as coming in degrees. As mentioned above, the "seeds" or "raw material" for sophisticated evaluations about meaning in life are present for all creatures that are relevantly engaged in a practical point of view (which is to say, more likely than not, all conscious creatures). So, while Wolf imagines a person who passively watches soap operas and guzzles pints as the out-and-out epitome of meaninglessness, a pragmatic view would not be committed to such a strong claim. On the pragmatic view, such a person would not live a life devoid of meaning; they would only be failing to maximize the meaningfulness of their life. Through a Deweyan process of evaluation, it would be clear that there would be better strategies for increasing the meaningfulness of one's life, both qualitatively and in collective assessments, but the person would still live a life with some modicum of meaningfulness.

This might seem like a small consolation for the pragmatic view, but it addresses one of the primary worries for Wolf. I mentioned in an earlier section that the two major worries that Wolf admits for her view—and specifically the objective dimension of her view—come in the form of a metaphysical worry and an ethical worry. The metaphysical worry involves how to flesh out some of the content of objective value. As mentioned, Wolf largely dodges this issue by appealing to an epistemological standard through ideal observers and exemplars of meaning in life. On the pragmatic view, the metaphysical issue is addressed head-on by appealing to a constructive process to help us determine the worthiness of certain pursuits. This process successfully threads the

needle between overly-permissive subjective criteria and overly-restrictive objective criteria. It has the distinct advantage of making sense of troublesome cases for both views while providing guidance for how to proceed and remaining open and flexible regarding the content of meaningful pursuits.

This brings me to Wolf's ethical worry. The worry here is that filling out objective criteria for meaningfulness results in a form of elitism or parochialism. Wolf says that this worry can be summed up through the question, "*Who's to say?—Who's to say* which projects are fitting (or worthy or valuable) and which are not?"¹⁰⁰ By setting out to define or determine which manners of living are meaningful and which are meaningless, there is a very real risk of building in chauvinistic and biased standards. Wolf readily concedes to the gravity of this worry, as well as admitting that her biases come through in her assessments: "No doubt the examples I use to illustrate my views, reflective as they are of my bourgeois American values, make this concern all the more salient."¹⁰¹ Wolf's working answer to this worry is to embrace the fallibility of the project and those involved, something which she shares in common with the pragmatist. She argues that the risk of elitism and chauvinism are minimized when we hold the judgments lightly and tentatively, that it is not the role of any one person or group of people to be the exclusive arbiters of meaning in life. Questions about meaning in life "are open to anyone and everyone to ask and to try to answer, and I assume that we will answer them better if we pool our information, our experience, and our thoughts."¹⁰²

This is all well and good for Wolf's view, in theory at least. There is the looming worry, however, that despite her advocacy of humility and fallibility, certain lives will nonetheless be

¹⁰⁰ Wolf, *Meaning in Life*, 39 [original emphasis]

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 39-40

deemed totally meaningless. Indeed, Haidt anticipates this, and at least part of his motivation for kicking the objective criterion to the curb is the insolubility of the elitism problem.¹⁰³ This ethical worry is avoided to a greater extent (though not altogether) by allowing for meaningfulness to come in degrees rather than needing to meet a certain threshold in order to obtain. The pragmatic approach maintains all of the proposed fallibility, humility, and tentativeness of Wolf's view, with the added benefit of conferring some amount of meaningfulness to a far wider range of lives. This, I propose, is a huge benefit, as discussion of meaningful lives, especially by academics walled-up in the Ivory Tower, unavoidably smacks of elitism. Addressing and redressing such a worry should be paramount in discussions of meaningfulness in lives. It would count against a view of meaning in life if it entailed that the majority of meaningful lives are lived by those who look and act just like the author, while meaningless lives were disproportionately made up of those who are apparently different. James described our pretension for dogmatizing about the way others ought to live to be "the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the trait in human character most likely to make the angels weep."¹⁰⁴ This worry, it seems to me, is a serious one. An approach to the question of meaning in life that allows for a wide diversity and plurality of meaningful lives, while offering up practical strategies for living with still more meaning, is quite valuable indeed.

The Pragmatic Fulfillment View, moreover, has built-in self-correcting procedures that can help mitigate the impact of our unavoidable biases. This view, by appealing to social contexts and our shared horizon of meaning, can act as a bulwark against existing power dynamics usurping or dictating what kinds of lives are necessarily meaningful. The type of complex and involved forms of inquiry proposed by the Pragmatic Fulfillment View offers strategies to avoid the worry of

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 96

¹⁰⁴ Bernstein, 63

elitism. Elizabeth Anderson, writing about pragmatic forms of moral inquiry (the point stands for issues of meaning), argues that under such an approach,

we do not already possess an independent standard of moral rightness, against which we can measure the moral success or failure of any particular society's norms. Nor do we model moral inquiry as best undertaken through thought experiments that can be carried out by an isolated individual, or by a demographically narrow sector of society, discussing matters around a seminar table (or in a legislative assembly or executive committee)—particularly not if that sector enjoys relative power and privilege over those affected by or subject to the moral norms under discussion. Although some things can be learned by these kinds of reflection, we must also be mindful of the profound biases that tend to corrupt the moral reflections of the relatively powerful, when they engage in unaccountable moral inquiry that is, implicitly or explicitly, authoritarian in its social organization.¹⁰⁵

Anderson is powerfully bringing to our attention that pragmatic forms of inquiry are fundamentally social and interactive and democratic. Such a process, in its very bones, offers a challenge to existing power dynamics that oppress or harm sectors of humanity. In other words, if we are deploying Dewey's scientific method, if we are attempting to come to full blown evaluations, *and yet failing to factor in the perspectives of those who are impacted by our actions*, then we aren't doing it right. We are failing to "grasp the problematic situation in all its breadth, depth, complexity, and richness, and then [failing] to respond intelligently to that situation as a way of reconstructing it for the better."¹⁰⁶ To be clear, pragmatism is committed to the notion that we are embedded, connected, social creatures. The notion of a wholly atomistic individual is a philosopher's abstraction. Thus, all of our actions, including how we pursue and amplify meaning in our lives will inevitably and always have social consequences. If we pretend that this is not the case, that we are just acting inside some sort of isolated vacuum, that our decisions and emotions and sense of meaningfulness are the choice of the individual and the individual alone, then we are

¹⁰⁵ Anderson, "The Social Epistemology of Morality" in *The Epistemic Life of Groups*, edited by Brady and Fricker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 91

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, 99

not grasping the complexity and interconnectedness of the situation. We are not acting in accord with reality. We are ignoring the Outward Clash and failing to equip ourselves to confront and resolve whatever problematic situations may be facing us.

The legitimate worry that discussions of meaning in life will unjustifiably and arbitrarily exclude certain folks does not, accordingly, invalidate the importance of the discussion. Rather, it underscores our responsibility to keep our biases in check. Questions about meaning in life remain salient and significant for most every person. It's true that for far too many people, historically and currently, the ability to pursue and maximize meaningfulness is tragically limited. People who can't get enough to eat or can't escape the suffocating burdens of subjugation or have no means for evading inclement elements are not likely in a position to reflect upon and pursue and cultivate activities that would be deemed maximally "worthy" for conferring meaning in life. Such lives are, nonetheless, meaningful and possessing of the capacity for increased meaning. What's entailed by the Pragmatic Fulfillment View is recognition of meaningfulness in even the most basic of valuations, and then a means for improving, individually, collectively and democratically, the capacity for constructing more meaning still.

3.6 Conclusion

Susan Wolf's Fitting Fulfillment View is a fantastic advancement on our stagnant intuitions about meaningfulness. The subjective and objective views have utterly dominated humanity's collective intuitions regarding meaning in life. Our thoughts have mostly wavered between those two intuitions—as evidenced by popular writings about meaning in life, from religion to existentialism—and it is refreshing for Wolf to offer some nuance on such a pressing and omnipresent issue. I have attempted to provide an alternative element to Wolf's well-known

hybrid view through the Deweyan pragmatic tradition. Wolf concedes that filling out the objective worthiness condition is the most difficult aspect of her view. Accordingly, she largely sidesteps the issue. I have argued that pragmatism is well-suited for making (a bit) more sense of the worthiness condition. Firstly, by being an experientially-oriented process philosophy, it collapses the subject/object divide. This allows for the abandoning of a threshold or necessary condition for obtaining meaning in life. Instead, it imbues experience with some iota of meaning from the start. I then appealed to Dewey's constructive process of evaluation in order to help figure out—pragmatically—what actions, emotions, and tendencies might be conducive to meaningfulness and how we can further cultivate them. This is an ends-in-view process that largely leaves open the content of meaningfulness, which has the benefit of allowing for changing conditions and contingencies to alter what confers (or, more to the point, amplifies) meaning in life. Altogether, this Pragmatic Fulfillment View offers a flexible and inclusive approach to the question of meaning in life that helps, provisionally, fill out worthiness conditions.

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