

ARTICLE

# A Naturalist's Defence of Meaning in Religious Pursuits

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## Abstract

Objectivist naturalists about life's meaning regard it as implicating no world but the natural one, and yet as deriving from more than just subjective attitudes or interests. Such naturalists must obviously deny prominent religious conceptions of meaning. But must they further deny that it can be found in religious pursuits? In this article, I defend a negative answer by arguing that, contrary to a prima facie plausible consideration in support of a positive answer, and by many objectivist naturalists' own lights, the meaning of life can be found in pursuits predicated on false belief.

## Résumé

Les tenants d'une approche naturaliste objectiviste sur le sens de la vie considèrent qu'il n'implique aucun autre monde que le monde naturel et que, néanmoins, il ne découle pas uniquement d'attitudes et intérêts subjectifs. Ces naturalistes doivent évidemment rejeter les conceptions du sens issues des grandes religions. Mais doivent-ils en outre nier que ce sens puisse être trouvé dans des quêtes religieuses ? Dans cet article, je défends une réponse négative en soutenant que, contrairement à une considération de prime abord plausible en faveur d'une réponse positive, et de l'aveu même de plusieurs objectivistes naturalistes, le sens de la vie peut être trouvé dans des quêtes fondées sur des croyances fausses.

**Keywords:** life's meaning; the meaning of life; meaning in life; religious pursuits; naturalism; objectivism; subjectivism; false belief

## 1. Introduction

In the contemporary literature on life's meaning, one finds not only various particular accounts of what meaning involves or requires or supervenes on, but also various general ways of understanding what these accounts are supposed to concern in the first place. In other words, one finds not only various *conceptions* of meaning, but also various *concepts* of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Among the concepts of meaning one finds are

<sup>1</sup> The concept-conception distinction that John Rawls (1971, p. 5) originally applied to justice is now a familiar one to contemporary philosophers. For more on its application to the meaning of life as a topic of inquiry, see Antti Kauppinen (2012, pp. 352–355) and Thaddeus Metz (2001, pp. 138–140).

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such ideas as that the meaning of life is the overall value of a life (Landau, 2017), that meaning is whatever is worthy of great admiration in life (Kauppinen, 2013; Metz, 2001), that meaning is the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life (Matheson, 2022), and that meaning amounts to the overarching or driving passion in a life (Singer, 1992/2010). Among the conceptions one finds are accounts along the following lines: life's meaning requires respecting God's commands (Fackenheim, 1965), to exemplify meaning is to become more like *Ein Sof* (i.e., the completely unlimited supernatural being) by transcending our limitations (Nozick, 1981), meaning involves the use of creativity to accomplish important things (Taylor, 1981), deeply caring about something is all that is required for meaning (Frankfurt, 1988), meaning supervenes on self-fulfilment alone (Feinberg, 1992), meaning requires a self-fulfilment that is objectively fitting (Wolf, 2010), and meaning involves the exercise of rational capacities in favour of certain basic features of the human condition (Metz, 2013).

Where life's meaning is construed in terms of one or another of the concepts just indicated, naturalists about meaning may be understood as those who embrace conceptions of it that do not put its existence at odds with naturalism as an ontological doctrine. As an ontological doctrine, naturalism amounts to the view that the natural world exhausts reality — that “reality consists of nothing but a single all-embracing spatio-temporal system” (Armstrong, 1978, p. 261), that “[t]he spacetime world is the whole world” (Kim, 2003, p. 90), or, more simply, that “everything is physical” (Papineau, 2001, p. 4). For naturalists about life's meaning, accordingly, it implicates no world but the natural one. For them, the meaning of life is a matter of “earthly existence” (Baier, 1957, p. 28) and wholly “constituted by physical properties” (Metz, 2013, p. 164; cf. Metz, 2019, pp. 6–7).<sup>2</sup>

All naturalists about meaning in this sense must obviously deny prominent religious conceptions of meaning. Whether they are subjectivists who see meaning as deriving from subjective attitudes or interests alone (e.g., Feinberg, 1992; Frankfurt, 1988), or whether they are objectivists who see meaning as deriving from something more than just subjective attitudes or interests (e.g., Metz, 2013; Taylor, 1981; Wolf, 2010),<sup>3</sup> naturalists about meaning must deny that it requires respecting God's commands, for example, because on that conception meaning

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<sup>2</sup> On my construal, so-called nihilists or pessimists who believe that there is no such thing as meaning precisely because their conception of it puts its existence at odds with naturalism as ontological doctrine (cf. Tartaglia, 2016, p. 2) do not count as naturalists about meaning. Such thinkers may well be naturalists of some sort, but in my view, they are not naturalists about meaning. Compare those whose conception of moral value puts its existence at odds with naturalism as an ontological doctrine (e.g., Mackie, 1971/1990), or those whose conception of the mental puts its existence at odds with naturalism as an ontological doctrine (e.g., Churchland, 1981): although they are obviously committed to naturalism as an ontological doctrine, we typically call them error theorists about moral value or eliminativists about the mind rather than naturalists about these things. It is also worth noting that, on my construal, naturalists about meaning need not (but may) reject the claim defended by some religious philosophers (e.g., Mawson, 2016) that our lives could exemplify greater meaning were there a certain sort of supernatural being or realm.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that in all of his later works (such as Taylor, 1981) Richard Taylor is clearly an objectivist about meaning, it is very common in the literature to interpret him as a subjectivist in his earliest work on the topic (Taylor, 1970). For a contrasting interpretation, however, see my “Creativity and Meaning in Life” (Matheson, 2018, p. 76, n. 6).

implicates a supernatural world of divine existence. For the same reason, naturalists about meaning must deny that by exemplifying it we become more like *Ein Sof*. Naturalists about meaning must even deny prominent non-theistic religious conceptions of meaning, such as the Buddhist view that the meaning of life is to achieve a state of enlightenment about the fundamentally illusory character of the natural world (Hudson, 1971), for on such conceptions meaning implicates a world devoid of the sorts of distinctions that characterize the natural one.

From the fact that all naturalists about meaning must deny prominent religious conceptions of meaning, it does not follow that they must all further deny that meaning can be found in religious pursuits. This is because it is obviously coherent for subjectivist naturalists to allow that meaning can be found in religious pursuits, despite the fact that it is incoherent for them to allow the truth of the religious conceptions of meaning. Consonantly with their naturalism, subjectivist naturalists can allow that religious pursuits involve the subjective attitudes or interests that (in their view) alone make for meaning.

But what about the objectivist naturalists about meaning? Must they, unlike their subjectivist counterparts, deny that meaning can be found in religious pursuits? The answer to this question is not obvious, and it is an unfortunate feature of the recent literature on meaning that the question has been ignored. It is unfortunate because objective naturalists have become the dominant voices for naturalism in the recent literature (Metz, 2023, Sections 3.1–3.2), and their silence on the question at hand all too easily suggests that to buy into the dominant form of naturalism about life's meaning is somehow to oppose religious pursuits as well as religious conceptions of meaning.

In what follows, I address this important but neglected question by defending a negative answer to it. In light of my defence, it is open to objectivist naturalists about meaning, no less than to their subjectivist counterparts, to maintain that life's meaning can be found in the characteristic pursuits of their deeply religious colleagues and friends and family members, as much as in the non-religious moral, intellectual, and aesthetic pursuits that these naturalists commonly uphold as exemplars of meaning in the literature.

I begin in the next section by offering some preliminary remarks about what I have in mind when I talk about religious pursuits, and about what is involved in saying that meaning can be found in them. In Section 3, I articulate a *prima facie* plausible consideration in support of the idea that objectivist naturalists about meaning must deny that it can be found in such pursuits. This consideration centres around the point that from the objectivist naturalists' perspective, the pursuits are one and all predicated on false belief. In Section 4, I then respond to this consideration. Against it I argue that, not just intuitively but also by many objectivist naturalists' own lights, meaning can be found in pursuits predicated on false belief.

## 2. Finding Meaning in Religious Pursuits

Pursuits are goal-directed activities, and their religious varieties may be distinguished by the attitudes that their agents bear towards the goals at which they are directed. As I talk of them here, religious pursuits are goal-directed activities in which agents

engage because they desire to achieve what is proper or fitting or otherwise valuable by virtue of certain facts that obtain in a world other than the natural one, and they believe that the goals of these activities are so proper or fitting or otherwise valuable. In other words, religious pursuits are goal-directed activities in which agents engage because they desire to achieve what is non-naturally warranted, and they believe that the goals of these activities are so warranted.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, to raise a child simply because you want to make this world a better place and you think that by raising the child you will do so is not to engage in a religious pursuit, in the sense that I am here attaching to the term. To raise a child because you want to uphold your side of a divine covenant and you think that by raising the child you will uphold this is to engage in a religious pursuit. To study sacred texts because you desire significant knowledge of the cultures in which they were written and you believe that the study will yield such knowledge need not be to engage in a religious pursuit, whereas to study the texts because you desire the keys to divine blessing and you believe the study will yield them is. To donate liberally of your time and money just because you want to live up to your moral obligations and you believe, following consequentialists like Peter Singer (1972) and Peter Unger (1996), that you are morally obligated so to donate is not to engage in a religious pursuit. To donate liberally of your time and money because you want to become more like *Ein Sof* by overcoming your selfish limits and you believe that the donating will help you accomplish this is to engage in a religious pursuit. To take up yoga simply because you want to improve your physical condition and you believe that yoga is an effective means to that end is not to engage in a religious pursuit. To take it up because you want to achieve nirvana and you believe that yoga will help you achieve it, by contrast, is.

This way of thinking about religious pursuits comports with well-known views of religiosity in general. It comports, for example, with the view that William James famously offers in the second lecture of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1901–1902/1999). James's focus is on religion within the individual, which he takes to be causally and explanatorily prior to institutional forms of the phenomenon. Religion in the sense in which he is interested amounts to a feature of individuals' behaviour and mental states, which he identifies with the conviction that these things put the individuals into contact with "the divine":

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. (James, 1901–1902/1999, p. 47)

James is clear that his notion of the divine is sufficiently broad to include not just the sort of supernatural reality affirmed by members of the Abrahamic religious

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth emphasizing that this conception of religious pursuits is meant to clarify my use of the term in this article. Although (as I indicate below) I take this conception to be one that many religious individuals will find agreeable, I do not mean to suggest that it lines up with all uses of "religious pursuit," "religious," etc.

traditions, but also the sorts of realities affirmed by some members of Buddhist (see Hudson, 1971) and transcendentalist (e.g., Emerson, 1842/1882) traditions, which we might call “alternatural” rather than supernatural realities because they are supposed to consist of worlds *other than* or *instead of* the natural world, rather than worlds *in addition to* or *beyond* the natural world. What makes individuals’ behaviour and mental states religious, then, has in James’s view to do with the attitudes the individuals have about how their behaviour and mental states relate to some kind of world distinct from the natural world that we at least appear to inhabit.

As is suggested by how well it comports with the Jamesian view of religiosity in general, my notion of religious pursuits is broad enough to be acceptable to many who would self-identify as religious, whatever their tradition. My notion is not so broad as to be toothless, however. It conflicts, for example, with Mark Johnston’s understanding of religiosity, which excludes belief in the supernatural altogether. The “very ideas of religion as essentially supernaturalist, and of God as essentially a supernatural being,” Johnston urges, are “idoltrous” (Johnston, 2009, p. 39), and genuine religion is about the naturalistic hope deriving “existential strength” in face of the “manifest, large-scale structural defects of human life” we encounter in the natural world, not about any sort of otherworldly hope (Johnston, 2009, p. 44).

My approach to religious pursuits also yields a respectable distinction between pursuits that are or are not religious, on the one hand, and those that merely appear to be so, on the other hand. To illustrate, consider the atheist’s regularly attending services at the local synagogue just to please a parent, or just because it is the socially respectable thing to do. On my approach, this social pursuit is not a religious one for the atheist, but it may well appear so to a casual observer. Anyone who is unfamiliar with the atheist’s attitudes about the goal of his pursuit might easily take the attitudes to be of a piece with the attitudes of many others who go to the synagogue, thus giving rise to the appearance of religiosity in a pursuit that is quite non-religious on my approach. Similarly, where its motivation is skillfully concealed to avoid virtue signalling, a believer’s dietary practice may be quite religious on my approach while appearing anything but to others. To those whose acquaintance with the believer is superficial, her dietary practice may seem simply to be that of an atheistic vegetarian, whereas those more intimately acquainted with her would know the truth of the matter, which is that the practice is religious to its core.

If that is how religious pursuits are here understood, what is it to say that the meaning of life can be found in them? It is not simply to say that the pursuits can lead to meaning in a causal sense. To say that would be to say something that borders on the trivial, something that I assume would be accepted by virtually everyone, including the most anti-religious of those who accept that there is such a thing as life’s meaning. Even if one denies that religious pursuits can themselves ever realize or be bearers of meaning, one will surely want to allow that in some instances these pursuits are causally responsible for the pursuits that one does want to allow as bearers of meaning. The militantly anti-religious naturalist about meaning, for example, will typically want to allow that dedicated attempts to oppose certain religious pursuits (say, dangerous or immoral fundamentalist ones) are among the bearers of meaning, and these anti-religious pursuits can obviously have the opposed pursuits as their causal impetuses. It is difficult to imagine any anti-religious thinker

who sees meaning in the efforts of the likes of Richard Dawkins (2006) or Christopher Hitchens (2007) as denying that historical examples of the religiosity these thinkers speak against are largely what caused them to begin their efforts.

Rather, to say that life's meaning can be found in religious pursuits is to say that these pursuits can themselves be bearers or realizers of meaning: in some instances, these pursuits exemplify meaning and do not merely cause other things that exemplify it. And to say this is to say something far from trivial. Indeed, in the recent literature, it is easy to find objectivist naturalists about meaning who accept that non-religious moral, intellectual, and aesthetic pursuits can realize meaning, but one will search far and wide in the literature before one finds an objectivist naturalist who is explicitly willing to allow that religious pursuits (*qua* religious pursuits) can.

It is true that objectivist naturalists do sometimes point to certain activities performed by famous religious figures as examples of pursuits in which meaning can be found. Thaddeus Metz, for example, singles out Mother Teresa's efforts in Calcutta as obvious sources of great meaning in life, at least on "the stereotypical view of her" (Metz, 2013, p. 212). But that naturalists like Metz do sometimes point to activities performed by religious individuals as examples of meaningful pursuits does not imply that they are singling out religious activities as realizers of meaning. For when these naturalists do on occasion point to such activities, their emphasis is entirely on the non-religious character of the activities. The appeal may be to what are in fact religious activities, but it is made to them only insofar as they are morally, or epistemically, or aesthetically exemplary activities; the religious qualities of the activities are completely ignored. Thus, Metz describes Mother Teresa's efforts in purely moral terms, without even a hint of their religious nature: they are sources of meaning, to be sure, but only "in the moral realm," that is, only to the extent that they exemplify such morally admirable features as "having so much compassion towards others, being devoted to helping them on that basis, and exhibiting the strength of will required to live among revolting conditions and miserable people" (Metz, 2013, p. 212).

For the purposes of this article, then, to say that life's meaning can be found in religious pursuits is to make a very non-trivial claim for objectivist naturalists: it is to make the claim that goal-directed activities in which agents engage because they desire to achieve what is non-naturally warranted and they believe that these activities' goals are so warranted can themselves realize meaning.

### **3. A Prima Facie Plausible Consideration for Objectivist Naturalists About Meaning**

When agents engage in pursuits because of false beliefs they hold about the goals at which those pursuits are directed, we may say that the pursuits are predicated on false belief. Note that for a pursuit to be predicated on false belief in this sense, the mere fact that an agent holds a false belief about the (or a) goal of the pursuit is insufficient; it must also be a fact that the agent engages in the pursuit because of that false belief, at least in the minimal sense that were the agent not to hold the belief, they would not continue the pursuit (or start it in the first place, if they hadn't already started). If I falsely believe that many of my neighbours share an interest in the aim of my

environmentalist project, but I would continue with that project (indeed, perhaps even more vigorously) were I not to believe this, then my false belief lacks the motivational force required to render the endeavour one that is predicated on that belief. In this case, I do not continue my endeavour because of the false belief. By contrast, if I pursue a certain vocational training with the false belief that it will prepare me well for a career in the relevant field, but I would not continue with the training were I to believe otherwise, my false belief does have the required motivational force: I pursue the training because I hold the false belief, and that makes the pursuit one that is predicated on false belief.

The principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits that are so predicated has a number of things to be said in its favour, from both inside and outside the objectivist naturalist camp. Consider, to begin with, the sorts of pursuits that are involved in cases like the following two:

*The recluse.* Because of his deeply set paranoia, a reclusive individual firmly believes that the isolation he spends much of his days pursuing will diminish the high danger he is under from all other individuals, who are without exception secretly intent on doing him harm. It is obvious to the increasingly fewer others who have any contact with this individual that there is nothing they can do to shake this false belief of his, and, consequently, nothing they can do to prevent him from continuing to pursue isolation, since it is also obvious to them that this belief is the driving force behind that pursuit. This individual's pursuit of isolation is often hurtful to those increasingly fewer others who have contact with him, but he is so dedicated to the pursuit that he takes little notice of the fact.

*The flat-earther.* An individual got past a mid-life crisis in a way that brings great embarrassment to most of his once close family members: he swallowed flat-earth theory hook, line, and sinker. His belief in the theory provided him with new energy in life, and it is what sustains him now in all of his pursuits as a flat-earth society member. Whether they involve exposing the diverse and seemingly unending cover-ups of modern science, finding ways to get the flat-earther word out to misguided members of the public, or making important contributions to annual society conferences, these pursuits now dominate this individual's life.

At least for many outside the subjectivist camp, including many objectivist naturalists about meaning, part of what makes pursuits like the recluse's and the flat-earther's so sad is that they seem so devoid of meaning. And the principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits that are predicated on false belief in the relevant sense yields a nice explanation of this lack of meaning. Both the recluse and the flat-earther engage in their respective pursuits because of (in the relevant motivational sense) the false beliefs they hold about the goals of those pursuits: the recluse engages in his pursuit of isolation because he falsely believes that the goal of that pursuit, isolation, will diminish the high danger he is under from others; and the flat-earther engages in his society pursuits because he falsely believes that their common goal, persuading



others to believe in flat-earth theory, is in line with truth. So, the recluse's pursuit and the flat-earth'er's pursuits are in the relevant sense predicated on false belief. But then, on the principle we are considering, we have a good explanation of why those pursuits are so devoid of meaning. Because predication on false belief precludes meaning, and because the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits are so predicated, meaning cannot be found in them.

One thing to be said in support of the principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits predicated on false belief, then, is that it nicely explains many people's intuitions, including many objectivist naturalists' intuitions, about the absence of meaning in pursuits like the recluse's and flat-earth'er's. Another thing to be said in support of the principle is that it coheres well with various other positions that objectivist naturalists have taken. For example, it fits nicely with David Wiggins's (1988) insight that, contrary to subjectivist, or as he calls them, "non-cognitivist" conceptions of life's meaning, the meaning of our pursuits depends on objective considerations even from our subjective, inner perspectives on these pursuits. As the non-cognitivist would have it, Wiggins notes:

Objectively speaking (once "we disengage our wills"), any reason [for action] is as good or bad as any other reason [...]. For on the non-cognitivist account, life is *objectively* meaningless. So, by the non-cognitivist's lights, it must appear that whatever the will chooses to treat as a good reason to engage itself is, for the will, a good reason. But the will itself, taking the inner view, picks and chooses, deliberates, weighs, and tests its own concerns. It craves objective reasons; and often it would not go forward unless it thought it had them. (Wiggins, 1988, p. 136)

The implication is that when we discover that our previous inner perspective on a given pursuit was significantly mistaken about the objective quality of the pursuit, we may rightly cease to regard the pursuit as one that exemplifies meaning. And for this implication the principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits predicated on false belief also provides a good explanation: we may cease to regard the pursuits as meaningful ones because, as we at least implicitly now recognize, they were predicated on false belief.

Consonantly with Wiggins's insight, Susan Wolf suggests that to revise the original myth of Sisyphus, as Richard Taylor (1970, pp. 265ff.) originally did, such that the gods decide to show some mercy by infusing Sisyphus's bloodstream with a substance that gives him a deep and abiding interest in his stone-rolling endeavours, is not to imagine Sisyphus as now exemplifying some meaning in his life (Wolf, 2010, p. 23). It seems rather in Wolf's view to imagine Sisyphus as radically mistaken about his endeavours due to some sort of deep delusion or extraordinarily diminished intellectual capacity. Thus, she writes:

When I try to understand the new Sisyphus's state of mind, when I try to imagine how someone might find stone-rolling fulfilling, I can only conceive of two possibilities: On the one hand, I can think of the substance in Sisyphus's veins as inducing delusions that make Sisyphus see something in



stone-rolling that isn't really there. On the other hand, the drug in his veins may have lowered his intelligence and reduced his imaginative capacity, thus eliminating his ability to perceive the dullness and futility of his labors or to compare them to other more challenging or worthwhile things that, had the gods not condemned him, he might have been doing instead. In either case, Sisyphus is in at least one respect worse off than he was before his transformation. He is either afflicted by mental illness or delusions or diminished in his intellectual powers. (Wolf, 2010, pp. 23–24)

Indeed, so much so, in Wolf's view, that we may be quite justified in “withhold[ing the] label” “meaningful” from the re-envisioned Sisyphus (Wolf, 2010, p. 25). Here too our principle yields a nice explanation: Sisyphus's deep delusion or extraordinary incapacity renders his endeavours non-meaningful because it renders them predicated on false belief. The delusion or diminished capacity causes Sisyphus to harbour woefully incorrect beliefs about his endeavours, which he now performs because of these beliefs. And this means, according to the principle, that the endeavours are not meaningful, because it means that they are predicated on false belief.

Further, the principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits predicated on false belief coheres well with the popular thought, which many objectivist naturalists about meaning may well be inclined to endorse, that if there is no God then the life of faith is wasted. This thought often sets the backdrop for the recently atheistic individuals' laments about their past lives as theists, as in the case of the ExChristian.net contributor who writes:

I feel very angry at the moment — actually the anger alternates with sheer devastating sadness — that I've wasted my life on a lie. All my life my decisions were based on something that isn't what it seemed. And I can't go back. The die has been cast. That really makes me want to weep. 44 years of my life lost. That's how I feel. (webmdave, 2007, June 25)

And similarly in the case of the r/Atheism Reddit user who comments:

I can't stop dwelling about it. It was all a waste of time for a fictional thing [...]. For the past 10 years. I cringe thinking about how [...] many opportunities I lost to hang out. I'm 21 now. Omg. I just need to let this out. I just want to cry. I'm not sad that I've lost my religion, I'm happy being an atheist, but the amount of my childhood I know I've lost for something that wasn't even real, and was just some fiction made by humans. Seriously, I've lost on so many opportunities. (These-Pop-1924, 2022, April 14)

Yet another point that plausibly speaks in favour of the principle we are considering is the insistence of certain religious apologists that the value of the religious practice they defend cannot be divorced from the truth of its associated dogmas. Oxford's famous C. S. Lewis serves as a good example. An important difficulty the Christian

apologist faces when talking to a modern British audience, he emphasized in a talk on apologetic strategy, is to keep “the question of truth” front and centre:

They always think you are recommending Christianity not because it is *true* but because it is *good*. And in the discussion they will at every moment try to escape from the issue “True — or False” into stuff about a good society, or morals, or the incomes of Bishops, or the Spanish Inquisition, or France, or Poland — or anything whatever. You have to keep forcing them back, and again back, to the real point. Only thus will you be able to undermine [...] [their] belief that a certain amount of “religion” is desirable but one mustn’t carry it too far. One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and if true, of infinite importance. (Lewis, 1945/1970, pp. 101–102)

It’s difficult to see how one could coherently insist on such an intimate union between the value of the religious practice and the truth of the dogmas while embracing the idea that meaning can be found in pursuits predicated on false belief.

The principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits predicated on false belief is thus likely to be looked upon favourably by many non-subjectivists about meaning, including many objectivist naturalists. But now notice that, from the objectivist naturalists’ perspective, that principle excludes religious pursuits from the realm of the meaningful. This is because, from the objectivist naturalists’ perspective, such pursuits are one and all predicated on false belief. In order for pursuits to be religious, the agents must engage in the pursuits because (among other things) they believe that the goals at which the pursuits are directed are non-naturally warranted. From the objectivist naturalists’ perspective, however, all such beliefs are false. Since the natural world exhausts reality, these naturalists think, there is simply no such thing as goals being warranted by facts that obtain in a non-natural world.

This is, of course, in contrast to many non-religious pursuits, including moral, intellectual, and aesthetic ones: from the objectivist naturalists’ perspective, these pursuits are not predicated on false belief. Moral pursuits are goal-directed activities in which agents engage (partly) because they believe that these goals are morally warranted, that is, proper or fitting or otherwise valuable from an altruistic or prosocial point of view. And beliefs about moral warrant may well be true from the objectivist naturalists’ perspective. Intellectual pursuits are goal-directed activities in which agents engage because they believe that these goals are intellectually warranted, and there is nothing in the objectivist naturalists’ perspective that necessitates the falsity of beliefs about intellectual warrant. Similarly for aesthetic pursuits, or goal-directed activities in which agents engage because they believe that these goals are aesthetically warranted, that is, proper or fitting or otherwise valuable from an artistic point of view. The objectivist naturalists about meaning can happily allow that such beliefs about aesthetic warrant are true, unlike the corresponding beliefs about non-natural warrant.

We are thus led to a *prima facie* plausible consideration in support of the idea that, unlike their subjectivist counterparts, objectivist naturalists about life’s meaning must

deny that it can be found in religious pursuits. Succinctly put, this consideration is that these naturalists ought to accept both premises of the following argument:

P1. Meaning cannot be found in pursuits that are predicated on false belief.

P2. Religious pursuits are predicated on false belief.

C. Meaning cannot be found in religious pursuits.

#### 4. Meaning in Pursuits Predicated on False Belief

Despite the *prima facie* plausibility of the consideration just rehearsed, I will now argue that objectivist naturalists about life's meaning should not ultimately accept that consideration because they should reject the general principle about meaning on which it rests, to wit, P1. And they should reject that principle, despite all of the things to be said in its favour, because it turns out to be subject to convincing counterexamples that these naturalists themselves should recognize. I will discuss three representative counterexamples of this sort.

First is the case of the activist:

*The activist.* A young activist joins a movement because she wants to be part of a push for social justice that will yield real results in her lifetime, and she believes that the movement fits the bill. She is quite correct about the just nature of the movement's central aims. But she is unfortunately wrong about the achievability of those aims in her lifetime: the opposing forces of injustice are just too entrenched and well connected, much more so than she or any of her fellow activists realize. She spends a long, difficult time — months stretching into years — active as a leader in the movement. She would not have done so were she to have realized the movement's futility, however; she would have devoted her energies to other movements with more achievable aims. But she does so because it simply takes this long for it to become apparent, even to a sharp, original mind like hers, that the cause is, in her lifetime at least, a hopeless one.

Were the activist not to have the false belief about the achievability of the core goals of her pursuit, she would not take up or continue the pursuit. She thus engages in the pursuit because of that belief, which means that the pursuit is for her predicated on false belief. Nevertheless, the activist's pursuit is very plausibly just the sort in which meaning can be found. There are sufficient intuitive differences between her pursuit and that of the recluse and those of the flat-earthier, for example, to justify us in deeming the one a potential realizer of meaning but not the others, despite the fact that they are all predicated on false belief.

These intuitive differences between the activist's pursuit, on the one hand, and the recluse's and flat-earthier's pursuits, on the other, are mainly moral. Intuitively, the activist's pursuit exemplifies positive moral value in a way that the recluse's and flat-earthier's pursuits do not. The activist's pursuit has the moral value of being aimed at an especially laudable prosocial end, for example, whereas the recluse's

and flat-earther's do not. The activist's pursuit also exemplifies a level of praiseworthy self-sacrifice that the recluse's and flat-earther's pursuits do not. And so on.

Further, by many objectivist naturalists' own lights, these sorts of moral differences may well suffice to make a difference, meaning-wise, between the activist's pursuit and the recluse's and flat-earther's pursuits, despite the fact that they are all predicated on false belief. Consider, for example, Metz's objectivist naturalist conception, according to which life's meaning is realized by activities wherein individuals exercise their rational capacities in favour of (i.e., in order to promote, protect, or preserve) what he calls "fundamental conditions of human existence" (Metz, 2013, p. 222). Because Metz construes the exercise of individuals' rational capacities in a very broad way, such that it includes many unsophisticated as well as sophisticated forms of cognition, deliberation, and thought-dependent conation and emotion (Metz, 2013, pp. 223–224), it is likely that both the activist's pursuit and the recluse's and flat-earther's pursuits will involve it to some degree, in his view. But Metz construes fundamental conditions of human existence as features of the human condition that are causally or explanatorily responsible for many other such features (Metz, 2013, p. 226); and given this, it is very plausible for him to hold that the moral differences between the activist's pursuit and the recluse's and flat-earther's pursuits entail that whereas the activist's pursuit involves the exercise of rational capacities in favour of such conditions, the recluse's and the flat-earther's pursuits do not. Thus, Metz can very plausibly say that, given the morally laudable goal of the activist's pursuit, this pursuit involves the exercise of rational capacities in favour of certain fundamental conditions of human existence, such as the human tendency to care specially for others in perceived circumstances of injustice (which is surely responsible for many other features of the human condition). And with equal plausibility, Metz can say that, given the morally not-so-laudable goals of the recluse's and flat-earther's pursuits, those pursuits do not involve the exercise of rational capacities in favour of fundamental conditions of human existence; they rather involve the exercise of rational capacities in favour of such non-fundamental conditions of human existence as the recluse's self-focused concerns or the flat-earther's mid-life-crisis-born desire to be perceived as someone important or really in the know (which are hardly responsible for many other features of the human condition).

Or consider Taylor's (1981) objectivist naturalist conception, which puts the use of creativity to accomplish important things at the heart of life's meaning. For an individual to use her creativity, in Taylor's view, is for her to attempt to do something non-imitative or non-imitatively, that is, either to attempt to do something that (as far as she knows) no one else has attempted to do, or in a way that no one else has attempted to do it. In this sense, in Taylor's view, the creative individual does things that are her "own creation," neither deriving from nor being "imposed" on her by others (Taylor, 1981, p. 24). Important accomplishments, according to Taylor, are "genuinely" and "lastingly" valuable (Taylor, 1981, p. 21): they are valuable in reality and not merely in the minds of the individuals who make them, and they are valuable for future as well as present individuals. The activist's pursuit clearly involves the use of a good deal of creativity in Taylor's sense; the pursuit could hardly put her in a position of leadership in the movement otherwise. (Leadership of any sort, including moral leadership, always involves a significant

use of creativity in Taylor's sense.) Of course, the recluse's and the flat-earth'er's pursuits may involve the use of creativity as well; the recluse may regularly think up novel ways of trying to diminish the danger he thinks he is under from others, for example, and the flat-earth'er may similarly devise quite novel if thoroughly misguided subsidiary explanations and defences of his cherished theory. But however impressive the creativity of the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits, given the moral differences between them and the activist's pursuit, it is clear that, according to Taylor, they will not be important, not genuinely and lastingly valuable, in the moral way that the activist's pursuit is. The moral value of its setting a great moral example or inspiration for future activists (despite its failure), for example, makes the activist's pursuit genuinely and lastingly valuable in a way that the recluse's and flat-earth'er's are plainly not. The recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits are also not important in other (e.g., intellectual or epistemic) ways, in Taylor's view. It is very plausible on Taylor's objectivist naturalist view, then, to suggest that the activist's pursuit has the sort of importance as well as the sort of creativity that life's meaning requires, despite the fact that it is predicated on false belief. By contrast, it is not plausible on Taylor's view to say the same of the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits.

Or, to take one further objectivist naturalist conception, consider Wolf's view that meaning in life comes from a kind of self-fulfilment that is objectively fitting. On this view, pursuits are meaningful only if they display both the right sort of subjective value and the right sort of objective value. On the subjective side, the pursuits must be self-fulfilling in the sense that the individual is deeply interested and absorbed in them, however difficult they may be (Wolf, 2010, p. 9). On the objective side, the pursuits must be ones whose subjective value is objectively fitting because they have some further sort of value "which is independent of and has its source *outside of*" (Wolf, 2010, p. 19) the individual. On this objectivist naturalist conception, no less than on Metz's and Taylor's, it is very plausible to say that the activist's pursuit is meaningful despite the fact that it is predicated on false belief. Given the passion with which she effects it over the years, the activist's pursuit clearly satisfies Wolf's subjective value requirement on meaning. And given its moral laudability (a type of value that is certainly in part independent of the individual, in Wolf's view), the pursuit also clearly satisfies Wolf's objective value requirement on meaning. This stands in contrast to the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits: these clearly do not satisfy Wolf's objective value requirement for meaning, despite satisfying her subjective value requirement for meaning.

The case of the activist thus seems to be a clear counterexample to P1 of the *prima facie* plausible consideration in Section 3, not only intuitively, but also by the lights of many objectivist naturalists, including all those who are inclined towards conceptions like Metz's, Taylor's, or Wolf's. Here is another such counterexample:

*The philosopher.* A professional philosopher's personal inclinations and past training are such that she cannot see her discipline's characteristic endeavours as worthwhile for entirely non-epistemic reasons. In her view, the value of genuine philosophical inquiry lies partly in the fact that it aims to generate and preserve knowledge of matters so deep that generating and preserving knowledge of them is an extremely difficult affair. This helps explain why she

spends a good portion of her career ingeniously defending a particular philosophical theory, which she was also the first to articulate and develop. She does this not simply because she thinks it has beneficial practical or moral effects, but because she believes that she is defending knowledge of deep truth and wants very much to defend such knowledge. As is so common in the discipline, however, the philosopher's theory turns out to be incorrect, and so not an important piece of knowledge she was defending after all. Later, after her death, considerations are uncovered that make the theory untenable. She can hardly be blamed for not discovering these considerations herself, but were she to have discovered them during her lifetime, she would have been the first to speak out against her own theory.

The goal of the philosopher's intellectual pursuit is to defend a philosophical theory, and she firmly believes that this goal amounts to a defence of important knowledge and truth. That she does believe this is plainly at the core of why she engages in the pursuit. Since her belief turns out to be incorrect, it follows that her pursuit is in the relevant sense predicated on false belief. But unless we are willing to embrace the absurd view that meaning is nowhere to be found in a great many of the intellectual pursuits adopted by professional philosophers (for surely a great many of these pursuits are predicated on false belief in just the way that our philosopher's is), we must grant that meaning may be found our philosopher's pursuit. Again, therefore, we have an example that intuitively runs flat against the principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits that are predicated on false belief, despite all that may be said in support of that principle.

There are also sufficient intuitive differences between our philosopher's pursuit and the recluse's and flat-earth's pursuits to justify us in regarding it as meaningful but not them. These intuitive differences are mainly epistemic, not moral as in the case of the activist. Thus, the philosopher's pursuit intuitively lacks certain epistemic flaws (other than the alethic-epistemic flaw of being predicated on false belief) that the recluse's and flat-earth's pursuits possess, and it intuitively possesses certain epistemic virtues that the recluse's and flat-earth's do not. For example, unlike the recluse's and the flat-earth's pursuits, the philosopher's pursuit does not have the epistemic flaw of being predicated on the sort of false belief that we would expect pretty much everyone of sound mind to avoid in the circumstances in which she has it. And unlike the recluse's and flat-earth's pursuits, the philosopher's pursuit very plausibly has such epistemic virtues as that of relying on evidential procedures that would eventually (were she to live long enough) allow her to discover the falsity of the false belief on which it is predicated, and that of being guided by a genuinely rigorous intellectual training appropriate to the topic of inquiry.

No less than the example of the activist, the example of the philosopher also runs against P1 by many objectivist naturalists' own lights. Thus, in contrast to the recluse's and flat-earth's pursuits, the philosopher's pursuit can very clearly be meaningful on Metz's (2013) objectivist naturalist conception of meaning. The philosopher is obviously exercising her rational capacities in Metz's sense; indeed, she is doing so in a very sophisticated way. And there is a very good case to be made that she is exercising those capacities in favour of what Metz would regard

as a fundamental feature of human existence. As the activist in our previous example was very plausibly exercising her rational capacities in favour of a morally relevant fundamental feature of human existence, namely, the human tendency to care specially for others in perceived circumstances of injustice, the philosopher in our present example is very plausibly exercising her rational capacities in favour of an epistemically relevant fundamental feature of human existence, such as the distinctly human inclination to inquire about reflective matters. In contrast to the recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits, our philosopher's pursuit is also plausibly regarded as meaningful on Taylor's (1981) objectivist naturalist conception. That pursuit is a paradigm of intellectual creativity on Taylor's view: the philosopher's initial articulation of her theory as well as the various moves she makes over the years in its defence are clearly her own creations, underived from and unimposed by others. And on Taylor's conception, the philosopher's pursuit is also clearly important for the genuine and lasting epistemic values it displays, despite its predication on false belief. (There is, after all, much intellectual insight to be had from reading the defences that great philosophers have given of their theories, even if we now recognize those theories as untenable.) On Wolf's objectivist naturalist conception as well, our philosopher's pursuit will very plausibly count as meaningful, unlike the recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits. Although their pursuits will presumably, like the philosopher's, meet Wolf's subjective value requirement for meaning (they, like it, are presumably self-fulfilling), it is quite implausible to maintain that they satisfy her objective value requirement for meaning. On Wolf's view, the philosopher's pursuit clearly has a significant amount of value that is at least partly independent of the philosopher (it doesn't supervene simply on her subjective attitudes or interests), because it has a significant amount of epistemic or intellectual value, despite its predication on false belief. The recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits do not have such objective value in Wolf's sense, nor any comparable objective value.

The case of the musician provides yet another apt counterexample to P1:

*The musician.* A gifted alternative-rock musician puts a great deal of skilled effort into the production of his latest album, in large part, of course, for the aesthetic value he believes it will exemplify. But he would be lying if he said that the critical reception of his work played no significant part in his motivation. He would not have worked on the project at all if he had not believed that it would result in a very high quality contribution to the genre, to be sure. But he also would not have worked on the project if he had not believed that the album would be well received by the rock critics of his time. And whereas the musician's belief about the aesthetic quality of his work is quite on the mark, his belief about its critical reception, reasonable though it is for him to hold given his history and circumstance, is not. The album is in fact destined to be one of those high-quality contributions that is largely panned by the critics of the day.

The musician's pursuit is as much predicated on his false belief about the critical reception of the album as it is on his true belief about the album's quality. And given that quality, as well as the skill with which the musician attempts to achieve it, it is intuitively very difficult to deny that meaning may be found in this pursuit.



So, the case of the musician stands as yet another intuitive counterexample to P1: this case also intuitively counsels us that meaning can indeed be found in pursuits that are predicated on false belief.

In the case of the activist, intuitive moral differences between the activist's pursuit and pursuits like the recluse's and flat-earth-er's justify us in regarding the activist's pursuit but not the other pursuits as meaningful. In the case of the philosopher, intuitive epistemic differences play a similar role. In the musician's case, it is mainly intuitive aesthetic differences that play such a role: intuitively, the aesthetic differences between the musician's pursuit and the recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits justify us in regarding his pursuit but not theirs as meaningful. The skill with which the musician effects his album project, and the quality of the result, are impressive aesthetic values, the likes of which are not to be found in the recluse's and flat-earth-er's endeavours. Such aesthetic differences justify us in taking the musician's pursuit, unlike the recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits, to be very meaningful.

Mainly because of these aesthetic differences, moreover, the musician's pursuit is also very plausibly one that will count as meaningful by many objectivist naturalists' own lights, in contrast to the recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits. On Metz's (2013) conception, the musician's pursuit not only involves the exercise of rational capacities, but (unlike the recluse's and flat-earth-er's pursuits) involves their exercise in favour of aesthetically relevant fundamental conditions of human existence, such as the distinctly human need to make and appreciate art that expresses widespread if not universal human themes (which Metz regards as something that all great artistic endeavours involve the exercise of rational capacities in favour of; Metz, 2013, pp. 230–231). On Taylor's (1981) conception, the musician's pursuit is another paradigm of creativity that will pretty clearly be important for the genuine and lasting aesthetic values it displays. (That the critics of the day pan the resulting album need not diminish this importance, in Taylor's view.) And on Wolf's conception there can hardly be any doubt that the musician's pursuit (once again, in contrast to the recluse's and the flat-earth-er's pursuits) is a meaningful one; it plainly satisfies her subjective value and objective value requirements on meaning, as much or more as other musical pursuits she holds up as exemplifying meaning, including those of the dedicated amateur cellist who aims to "achieve excellence" or "develop [her] powers" (Wolf, 2010, p. 37).

In Section 3, we saw a *prima facie* plausible consideration in support of the idea that objectivist naturalists about meaning must deny that it can be found in religious pursuits. The *prima facie* plausibility of this consideration does not survive more careful reflective scrutiny, however. In particular, as I have tried to show in the present section, there are on reflection very convincing counterexamples to the core principle on which this consideration rests, namely, P1. Contrary to that principle, cases like the activist, the philosopher, and the musician are clearly ones in which meaning *is* to be found in pursuits predicated on false belief. Moreover, these are clearly cases in which meaning is plausibly to be found even by many objectivist naturalists' own lights, and consonantly with their insistence, against their subjectivist counterparts, that meaning is not to be found in such contrasting cases as that of the recluse and the flat-earth-er. On all of the most prominent objectivist naturalist conceptions of meaning, such Metz's, Taylor's, and Wolf's, the verdict would appear to be the same: pursuits like the activist's and the philosopher's

and the musician's are meaningful, even if pursuits like the recluse's and flat-earth'er's are not. Despite its *prima facie* plausibility, then, P1 turns out to be ultimately untenable for many objectivist naturalists about meaning.

The objectivist naturalists' position in relation to P1 is hardly unique, given the counterexamples to that principle that I have presented in this section. It is the same sort of position that, say, traditional epistemologists found themselves in relative to the principle that justified true belief suffices for knowledge, once Edmund Gettier (1963) presented his counterexamples to that principle. It is the same sort of position that many theorists of free will found themselves in relative to the principle that responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise, once Harry Frankfurt (1969) presented his counterexamples to that principle. Gettier's counterexamples put the epistemologists in the position of having to acknowledge that, despite the *prima facie* plausibility of the epistemological principle, it should by their own lights be abandoned. Frankfurt's counterexamples put the free will theorists in the position of having to acknowledge that, despite the *prima facie* plausibility of the principle about responsibility, it should by their own lights be abandoned. In a similar way, I submit, the counterexamples I have discussed above put objectivist naturalists about life's meaning in the position of having to acknowledge that, despite the *prima facie* plausibility of the principle that meaning cannot be found in pursuits predicated on false belief, that principle should by their own lights be abandoned.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that there is good reason for objectivist naturalists about life's meaning to reject a *prima facie* plausible consideration in support of the idea that they are precluded from finding meaning in religious pursuits. Other considerations may, of course, be offered up in support of this idea, but I see none that are likely to be nearly as plausible as the one we have found wanting.

One might, for example, try to make the case that for objectivist naturalists about meaning, religious pursuits will not just always be predicated on false belief, but also always fall short of meaning in the moral or epistemic or aesthetic ways in which the recluse's and the flat-earth'er's pursuits fall short. Thus, one might suggest, objective naturalists ought to accept both premises of something like the following argument:

P1'. Meaning cannot be found in pursuits that display the epistemic flaws that the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits display, or lack the moral values that these pursuits lack, or lack the aesthetic values that these pursuits lack.

P2'. Religious pursuits either display the epistemic flaws that the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits display, or lack the moral values that the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits lack, or lack the aesthetic values that the recluse's and flat-earth'er's pursuits lack.

C. Meaning cannot be found in religious pursuits.

The trouble with this consideration, however, is that even if the broad-ranging, disjunctive principle on which it rests, P1', has a level of *prima facie* plausibility

for objectivist naturalists similar to that of P1, the other important element of the consideration, P2', will not be nearly as plausible as the analogous element of the consideration we discussed in Section 3. P2 of the consideration we discussed in Section 3 is *maximally* plausible for all naturalists, including all objectivist naturalists. P2', by contrast, is far from it. Whereas objectivist naturalists are clearly bound, qua naturalists, to view religious pursuits as always predicated on false belief, they are equally clearly not bound, qua naturalists, to view religious pursuits as always satisfying the disjunctive condition of P2'. And I suspect that all but the most cloistered of objectivist naturalists will regard P2' as deeply *implausible* even on the face of things, for they will be quite aware of many real-world religious pursuits that, just like the activist's, the philosopher's, and the musician's, clearly do not satisfy that disjunctive condition.

Because the consideration we discussed in Section 3 was found wanting, therefore, and because I see no other consideration that would as plausibly support the idea that objectivist naturalists about life's meaning must deny that meaning can be found in religious pursuits, I conclude that such naturalists are free to embrace the encouraging thought that meaning can be found in religious pursuits. We objectivist naturalists, no less than our subjectivist counterparts, can be quite optimistic about the meaning-realizing capacities of the religious activities of others, even if we are precluded from these activities due to our lack of relevant belief.

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