Despair as a Threat to Meaning: Kierkegaard’s Challenge to Objectivist Theories

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Abstract: The question of meaning in life has enjoyed renewed attention in analytic discourse over the last few decades. Despite the apparently “existential” quality of this topic, existential philosophy has had little impact on this re-energized conversation. This paper draws on Kierkegaard’s The Sickness unto Death in order to challenge the objectivist theory of meaning in life. According to that theory, a meaningful life is one replete with objective goods. Kierkegaard, however, exposits four forms of the spiritual sickness he calls despair that are compatible with the possession of objective goods. If this account is convincing, it poses a challenge to the objectivist view, suggesting that a subjective contribution is also necessary to fully account for meaning in life. By a process of negative inference, this paper concludes by sketching out what this subjective contribution might look like and suggests the term “authenticity” in order to capture this subjective element of a meaningful life.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; despair; meaning in life; objectivism

The question of meaning in life has enjoyed renewed attention in analytic discourse over the last few decades. For some time this topic was neglected, arguably as a result of the influence of logical positivism, which confined the question of meaning to a feature of language. Analytic philosophers are now addressing the issue under the rubric of value theory. The general consensus is that calling a life “meaningful” is comparable (but different from) calling it happy or morally good; it amounts to an attribution of value to human life.

Most analytic philosophers disavow interest in what is called “the meaning of life” preferring instead to speak of “meaning in life” to underscore the difference between having an overarching theory behind human life as a whole and ascribing value to particular human lives.

Despite the presumably “existential” dimension of this question, the contribution of existential philosophy as such has not been felt much in the current Anglo-American conversation. This essay purposes to explore the relationship of meaning in life to well-being by putting into conversation the existential thought of Søren Kierkegaard with contemporary analytic philosophy. This paper brings Kierkegaard’s philosophy to challenge the current consensus in the analytic literature on the meaning of life by showing how the mere possession or achievement of objective goods is insufficient for meaning in life.

Proceeding on the basis of the above distinction between meaning of life and meaning in life, I advance Kierkegaardian reflections that do not depend upon his supernaturalist point of view and meet naturalist analytic thinkers on their own ground. Kierkegaard, as a Christian thinker, has a theory of the meaning of life for all humanity, but that does not concern us here, only his thoughts that touch upon the meaning of any individual human life, understood as a kind of value that life can bear. I show how key ideas from Kierkegaard’s The Sickness unto Death challenge the current consensus way of thinking about meaning in life. This text outlines (among others) four forms of the spiritual sickness Kierkegaard calls despair that suggest—to the extent that they are accepted as phenomenologically compelling—that the mere possession of objective goods is insufficient for a life to be meaningful. I conclude from this study that a Kierkegaardian account would arguably align with what I would call an “integrated” theory or “hybrid” theory of meaning in life.
1. Meaning in Life According to Objectivist Theories

The particular school of meaning-in-life philosophy that I am concerned with is what has come to be called “objectivist” as opposed to “subjectivist.” The former, according to Thaddeus Metz, is marked by the view that “certain features of our natural lives can make them meaningful, but not merely in virtue of any positive mental orientation” [12], p. 796. He regards this position as the most popular in the current literature, and he rightly points out its attractiveness to those who find the subjectivist position counter-intuitive. The subjectivist position “maintains that what makes a life meaningful depends on the subject . . . . More specifically, it is the view that whether a life is meaningful essentially is a function of whether it is (or its parts are) the object of some proattitude or another” [12], pp. 792–793. The reason the subjectivist position is often regarded as counter-intuitive is that if the meaning of one’s life is sufficiently determined by the attitude of the person living it, then that seems to leave the door open to a range of possible life-projects that strike most people as implausible bases for a meaningful existence. In Metz’s summation, which gathers striking examples from a number of interlocutors in this field, “critics point out that, so long as the relevant mental states obtain, subjectivism oddly entails that a person’s existence could become significant merely by staying alive, harming others, gearing her life around a certain color, having 3732 hairs on her head, collecting bottle tops, or eating ice cream” [12], p. 795. Indeed most thinkers working on meaning in life today would resist this sort of absurd conclusion. Yet the subjectivist position is attractive to the extent that it captures another set of intuitions, which is that forms of meaningful living are likely to be diverse, and we ought not to put too restrictive a check on what sort of life might be meaningful in advance of considering a host of different possibilities.5

A third sort of theory is worth considering on its own, though Metz tends to place it under objectivism and will reject it in his own final judgment. I prefer to call this theory “integrated,” though some have called it a “hybrid” theory.6 Susan Wolf is its most powerful advocate, and she argues for its value in part on the basis of its ability to gather up a number of competing intuitions that might otherwise uncomfortably sit side-by-side.7 Wolf’s theory explicitly comprises both an objectivist and a subjectivist component, which she seeks to link:

A meaningful life must satisfy two criteria, suitably linked. First, there must be active engagement, and second, it must be engagement in (or with) projects of worth. A life is meaningless if it lacks active engagement with anything. A person who is bored or alienated from most of what she spends her life doing is one whose life can be said to lack meaning. Note that she may in fact be performing functions of worth . . . At the same time, someone who is actively engaged may also live a meaningless life, if the objects of her involvement are utterly worthless [2], p. 211.

The appeal of an integrated theory is, I take it, obvious. On the one hand, it acknowledges that a meaningful life must in fact accomplish something objectively good. In the absence of genuine value, it would be hard to see how a life could be meaningful—this is the recognition that seems to work most vigorously against straight-up subjectivism. On the other hand, the integrated view acknowledges that a meaningful life must be meaningful for the person living it, that even if a life is spent in morally praiseworthy pursuits by someone who finds such activities burdensome rather than fulfilling, then that person’s life is not meaningful, however valuable her achievements might be. Here, it seems to me, the intuition is something like this: I can concede that being a chemistry professor would be an excellent way to spend one’s life, perhaps even just as valuable as being a biology professor, but for all that I can still say that being a biology professor is meaningful for me because it interests me, fulfills me, and keeps me engaged with my career in ways that being a chemistry professor just would not. It is not that there is a difference here in value but in subjective engagement.
Metz advances a couple of lines of criticism against this view that I think Kierkegaard can respond to in interesting ways. First, he says subjectivist positions are not often clear about exactly what kind of proattitude they have in mind as necessary for meaning. In his estimate, “they have not systematically addressed the issue of whether it is affection, conation, volition, cognition, or some combination that fundamentally matters, sometimes unwittingly shifting between capacities” [2], p. 793. A more serious problem is that the subjectivist component is just not necessary for a meaningful life, according to Metz. “Suppose a medical researcher discovers a cure for cancer after long years of work done without anticipation or enjoyment. Even if the researcher has been bored by her work, it seems plausible to suggest that it would confer some meaning on her life. Perhaps such a case shows that active engagement can enhance life’s meaning, without being necessary for it” [2], p. 797.

I intend to show that Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death* supplies us with scenarios under which a person might have the objective goods relied upon by contemporary objectivist theories while lacking meaning; in Kierkegaard’s terms, such a person remains in despair despite the objective value of their life. What this suggests is that if Kierkegaard’s depictions of persons in despair are convincing, then a hybrid theory, incorporating a subjective criterion for meaning, may be defensible in Kierkegaardian terms. I conclude this study by suggesting that such a subjective criterion could be fleshed out in the way Metz requires by a process of negative inference: what Kierkegaard describes as lacking in certain forms of living that are deficient with respect to meaning is a clue to what should be present in such lives that would make them more meaningful.

In what follows, I analyze the four forms of despair that Kierkegaard maintains can be present in a person’s life without them being consciously aware of it. I show that each one consists in a misrelation between the self and the objectively good features of the self’s life. These forms of despair, if they strike readers as convincing, pose a challenge to the objectivist view of meaning of life, which claims that the possession of objectively valuable goods is both necessary and sufficient for a meaningful life. My argument against the objectivist view of meaning of life is that despair, which arises from the internal constitution of the self, undercuts the sufficiency of objective goods to make a life meaningful. In this way, I seek to counter Metz’s second objection given above to the integrated view. A subjectivist component is necessary for a theory of meaning in life.

Finally, I conclude that because despair is compatible with a life replete with objectively valuable goods, on Kierkegaard’s terms, a subjectivist component is necessary to supplement the objectivist component. This is because, for Kierkegaard, many of the forms of misrelation indicate a variety of ways (four, within the limits of this study) that a self can fail to relate well to the goods of its life. This admitted speculative enterprise will shed light on what kinds of proattitudes might be required for a healthy, non-despairing attitude toward objectively valuable goods, thereby blunting Metz’s first criticism of the integrated view given above.

2. Despair as Threat to Meaning

As is generally known to readers of The Sickness unto Death, the threat of despair can menace the integrity of my selfhood even when I am not conscious of it. Kierkegaard argues that despair manifests itself as a misrelation in the dynamically interrelated factors of the syntheses that comprise human existence: infinity and finitude, the temporal and eternal, possibility and necessity [15], p. 13. One commentator on this text helpfully explained the constitutive factors of selfhood in terms of “self-shaping and self-acceptance.” Infinity, eternity, and possibility denote the aspects of selfhood that are open to our constitution, the parts of our selves that we have willed. Finitude, temporality, and necessity denote the aspects of selfhood that are given to us, the parts of our selves that we did not choose but that constrain our choices. The self just is both its givens and what remains open to it, these two aspects being in constant dynamic interplay. Considered in themselves, the factors are sufficient for human existence, but they are not sufficient for selfhood; on Kierkegaard’s
account, a human being is not necessarily a self. To be a self is to consciously relate to the factors, that is, it is to be conscious of oneself as infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, open to possibility and bound by necessity. The issue for the self of the Sickness is what to do about what I am, and this fundamental action that disposes of the self plays out in the scene of practical concern; it is not just a question of dwelling abstractly on possibility or necessity (for example) but rather acting on possibilities in relation to the necessities in which possibilities present themselves.

Because despair is well-nigh universal [15], pp. 22–28, for Kierkegaard, the self is under constant threat, a threat that has ramifications throughout the factors that comprise human being and the relation of the self that just is the conscious appropriation of those factors. There is an ongoing daily danger of despair, which must nevertheless be actively eradicated in order to be eliminated as a threat to my self-constitution. Only when this is done can the self will to be its self in fullness, only then can it in Kierkegaard’s words be “willing to be itself.”

Kierkegaard asserts that despair must be actively vanquished at every moment. “Not to be in despair is not the same as not being lame, blind, etc. If not being in despair signifies neither more nor less than not being in despair, then it means precisely to be in despair. Not to be in despair must signify the destroyed possibility of being able to be in despair; if a person is truly not to be in despair, he must at every moment destroy the possibility” [15], p. 15. It is in this respect that despair is unlike an ordinary sickness. While we can say that a person caught a cold and now has it, if one is in despair it is because one is getting sick so to speak at every moment, and there is no point in the past that one can definitively point to as the one at which a person despaired in the past tense. Every moment of despair is the present moment [15], pp. 16–17. “Every moment he is in despair he is bringing it upon himself.”

The task of willing to be your self is one that is never done.

Given that despair is seemingly inextricable, we can make somewhat more sense of the at first implausible claim that despair is both universal and often unconscious. Unlike an ordinary sickness, one cannot confidently say one is not in despair simply because one does not feel like one is in despair. “Despair can be affected, and as a qualification of the spirit it may also be mistaken for and confused with all sorts of transitory states, such as dejection, inner conflict, which pass without developing into despair” [15], p. 24. Conversely, it is quite possible to be in despair without knowing it. “A sense of security and tranquility can signify being in despair; precisely this sense of security and tranquility can be the despair, and yet it can signify having conquered despair and having won peace [15], p. 24.” Therefore, I can feel dejected without being in despair, and I can be in despair while feeling at peace. That same feeling of peace can betoken a genuine state of being free of despair, but it can also be compatible with being in despair.

The covert nature of despair for the vast majority is attributable to the fact that we are often ignorant of its presence within our lives. We are accustomed in fact to speak of despair ensuing upon some loss or setback. Kierkegaard uses the example of Cesare Borgia’s failure to attain the power and status of a modern Caesar and a young woman’s abandonment by her fiancé [15], pp. 19–20. In both cases, we are tempted to say that the disappointment that has befallen has caused the despairing person to be in despair. This, however, is not so according to Kierkegaard; these disturbing events are merely the occasion for realizing that I am in despair. “An individual in despair,” he writes, “despairs over something. So it seems for a moment, but only for a moment; in the same moment the true despair or despair in its true form shows itself. In despairing over something, he really despaired over himself, and now he wants to be rid of himself” [15], p. 19. Cesare Borgia is not in despair because he cannot be Caesar; he is in despair over being the self who he is, and “now he cannot bear to be himself” [15], p. 19. What is intolerable to him is not that he has failed in his political ambitions but that he cannot be rid of the self he is. So as long as the self can entertain a delightful prospect for itself, as long as things are going smoothly, all appears to be well, but when a crisis befalls, then the person in despair is not plunged into despair for the first time but rather for the first time realizes that they
have been in despair all along. Like Ivan Illyich on his death bed, they realize that all the apparent self-satisfaction, the professional and familial success, all the material comfort and prosperity has been a sham.

Even happiness falls under Kierkegaard’s critical judgment, and here we glimpse a first potential challenge to the relative placidity of the analytic philosophers of meaning. “Even that which, humanly speaking, is utterly beautiful and lovable—a womanly youthfulness that is perfect peace and harmony and joy—is nevertheless despair. To be sure, it is happiness, but happiness is not a qualification of spirit, and deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair.” Lest we take Kierkegaard to be overly morbid here, by “happiness” he means something like “good fortune” rather than deep personal fulfillment. Kierkegaard is not an enemy of happiness, but he is opposed to superficial self-satisfaction, and he might be better said to be a believer in joy rather than “happiness.” Keeping that in mind, the point is nevertheless critical, and that is that even an apparently happy life, one outwardly beautiful and lovable, can still conceal despair at its core. This difference is an intuitive one to which many contemporary thinkers on meaning in life subscribe. A life can be hedonistically “happy” in the sense that all its wants are provided for while lacking in meaning.

Fulfillment of the deepest kind is compatible with a life of (at least some) suffering and difficulty. Given this compatibility, it is less surprising to find Kierkegaard affirm that “the common view that despair is a rarity is entirely wrong: on the contrary, it is universal” [15], p. 26. It must be false then that to feel as if you are not in despair is tantamount to not actually being in despair. As Robert C. Roberts has shown, despair in Kierkegaard’s way of looking at it is not just an emotion, such that while it may be paradigmatic of despair that the despairer should feel desperate, it is not necessary to the definition of the condition. In this sense, despair is more akin to vanity or humility, and in conditions like this, “there is nothing incongruous or unparadigmatic about a person being vain or humble all his life without ever feeling vain or humble. In fact a person who is vain without noticing it is a more perfect paradigm of vanity than one who in addition to being vain also feels vain. One strategy for disabusing a person of his vanity is to get him to feel it” [27], p. 141. If we can appreciate despair as being similar to vanity in Roberts’s comparison, it would be not only unsurprising but quite consistent for Kierkegaard to claim that “most men live without ever becoming conscious of being destined as spirit—hence all the so-called security, contentment with life, etc., which is simply despair” [15], p. 26. If one can be in possession of a variety of goods such as security, happiness, contentment, good fortune, etc., one can still be in despair, because despair has to do with the internal relation of the self to itself, which lies beneath as it were the enjoyment of these goods. If despair is comparable to vanity, then one can be in despair without feeling desperate, just as one can be vain without knowing one is vain.

### 3. The Four Forms of Unconscious Despair

The diagnostic agenda of the text is to reveal to the reader their own despair and allow them to confront their underlying condition. That a person could be leading a quite meaningful life by contemporary philosophical standards while also being in despair is a problem meant to be given a bit more articulation and defense by Kierkegaard’s fourfold analysis of the forms of despair capacitated by the four factors of the syntheses: infinite–finite and possibility–necessity. For Kierkegaard, the self can take up a variety of possible attitudes or comportments toward the circumstances and situations of its existence, and these comportments are named by the factors that comprise human existence. The four forms of despair arising from each factor we will explore in a bit more detail to see how it is that a person could, on Kierkegaardian terms, be living a life that would satisfy the contemporary consensus on what makes for a meaningful life while nevertheless being in despair, keeping in mind that it is these four forms that Kierkegaard says one can succumb to without being conscious of the fact that one is in despair at all. What I hope to prove is that each form of despair exhibits in a distinct way how I can be misrelated to the goods.
of my own life, such that while those goods can be present and valued for what they are, I am nevertheless in despair because I am not related to myself in such a way as to possess them in a healthy manner. If it can be shown that Kierkegaard’s account is plausible and compelling, then there is reason to wonder whether a contemporary theory of meaningful living ought not to take account of something like Kierkegaardian despair to complete a truly comprehensive theory of meaningfulness and the existential threats to it.

3.1. Infinitude’s Despair

“A person,” Kierkegaard writes, can “go on living fairly well, seem to be a man, be occupied with temporal matters, marry, have children, be honored and esteemed—and it may not be detected that in a deeper sense he lacks a self” [28], p. 32. I can be therefore in possession of the sorts of values that objectivist analytic philosophers of meaning think are sufficient for meaningful living while still lacking a self. To all appearances I have valuable goods in my life—honors, relationships, busyness with important affairs—and yet I may not know I am in despair, may not be aware that I must come to will to be myself. The first way I can fail to do this is through infinitude’s despair. In this form of despair, the self is carried away from itself by “the fantastic, the unlimited” [28], p. 30. This life is one lived not in actuality but in imagination, which Kierkegaard here calls the medium most closely related to the fantastical; there are three human capacities in which the imagination can take hold: feeling, knowing, and willing. When feeling is rendered fantastical, then a person is volatilized by their own sentimentality, which comes to be connected to abstractions rather than actual lived relationships. Such a person may have feeling for an abstraction such as “humanity” while feeling nothing toward any particular persons. With respect to knowing, the infinitized self acquires more and more “inhuman” knowledge while coming to know less and less of one’s self. A person in this form of despair may accumulate many facts, but these do nothing to improve self-knowledge or promote actual transformation of the self [28], p. 31. Finally, when the will is infinitized, it directs itself toward grander and grander ambitions while neglecting the tasks at hand, those things that “can be accomplished this very day, this very hour, this very moment” [28], p. 32. Such a person may have staggering plans, but they are unable to advance along the way that leads to their attainment.

In every case, it would seem that the point is that the person suffering from infinitude’s despair is in fact self-alienated from their own life situation and its attendant goods. Feeling and relationship, knowledge and inquiry, plans and goals are all good things, and the life of the person in infinitude’s despair can be replete with them. Yet the problem persists that they are not reconciled to and involved in the particular actualities that would yield the true benefit of all such goods. They have feeling that does not extend to action on behalf of any particular person; they have knowledge that sits arid and unproductive of self-awareness; they have bold plans and no attentiveness to the mundane tasks needed to achieve them. The person suffering from infinitude’s despair then remains at arm’s length as it were from their own life, driven by fantastical longing beyond specific feelings for these people, knowing of the self, willing of the one task for the day, into a kind of spectral distance. This is the person of whom Kierkegaard says they can “go on living fairly well, seem to be a man, be occupied with temporal matters, marry, have children, be honored and esteemed,” for all these things are compatible with this form of despair in particular. The one immersed in infinitude’s despair has all these things—the sort of things that make for a meaningful life—and yet she is in despair because she relates to them fantastically, as if they were not really hers.

3.2. Finitude’s Despair

If the person in infinitude’s despair is at a distance from the goods of her own life, volatilized in a wild removal from her own concrete self and real lived situation, then the person in finitude’s despair has—predictably—the opposite problem. She has lost herself not in distancing herself from her worldly activities and accomplishments but
by total immersion in them. This is what it is to become a “mass man,” that nameless face in the crowd of whom Kierkegaard was one of the earliest and most astute prophets. The mass man has lost himself, but “by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world.” His life is “cozy and comfortable,” lived entirely according to proverbial wisdom, venturing nothing great [28], p. 34. Such individuals “use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly, etc., perhaps make a name in history, but themselves they are not,” and that is because such persons precisely lose themselves in these enterprises and achievements [28], p. 35. So completely do they plunge into their achievements, their relationships, their daily activities, that they are exhausted by them without remainder.

On Kierkegaard’s account, it is possible—even praiseworthy—to have the valuable things that suffice for meaning in life according to the analytic account, but they cannot suffice for his account because for him there is a self that relates to itself prior to and without being exhausted by, those valuable things. That self despairs or flourishes and can will to be its self independently of the presence or absence of such valuable things. The one who lives meaningfully according to the analytic account does so because she is what she has; for Kierkegaard, this degree of coincidence of the self with its achievements, relationships, and pursuits obscures the deep structure of the self and runs the risk of the obliteration of the self in its own projects and pursuits. The mass man is burdened by “reductionism, narrowness.” The mass man is a number, not an individual. He is “tricked out of its self by ‘the others’” [28], p. 33. The problem is not that he lacks valuable things but that he holds them as a function of what “the others” value. His appraisals are not his own but those of his peers. He makes not his own decisions but follows the majority consensus. In this way, the misrelation could be said to consist in the fact that while the person in finitude’s despair has achievements to her credit, she, in a way, cannot call them her own, since they are entirely a function of what others have determined for her or others’ judgment as to their desirability.

3.3. Possibility’s Despair

The synthesis of possibility and necessity is of course parallel with the synthesis of finitude and infinitude. Naturally, necessity is a constraint on possibility just as the finite is a constraint on the infinite. The self, according to Kierkegaard, is as much a function of possibility as necessity. Possibility is grasped by imagination (which we have seen already has a significant role to play in Kierkegaard’s theory of the self), and by the power of imagination, the self is able to entertain possible versions of itself. For this reason, Kierkegaard claims that “the self is potentially just as possible as it is necessary” [28], p. 35. The self’s possibilities are as much a part of itself as the fixed conditions of the self, with which they are always in dialectical interplay. Insofar as a self is what it is, it is necessarily so, but insofar as the self is also a task, a project to be pursued, it is possibility too, because the self is always open to its own ongoing constitution, development, and even improvement.

In fact, I would point out that for Kierkegaard possibility is not just a matter of a particular option for action in any given situation but rather a possible way of being toward options for action in general. “Possibility” names not just a specific option but rather a whole mode of comportment toward all options and how I interpret them for myself. It is not merely the opposite of actuality but refers instead to that aspect of actuality that requires the self’s response to it.\(^\text{17}\) Possibility’s despair comes about, however, “if possibility outruns necessity so that the self runs away from itself in possibility, it has no necessity to which it is to return” [15], pp. 35–36. Once again, it would seem to be possibility itself, not just a given option, that is in view. The person in this form of despair is not in despair over a given possibility but over how to negotiate possibility itself as a constituent factor of selfhood.

Necessity is a sort of anchor point in Kierkegaard’s theory of the self. No matter what possibility I imagine, I still have to be someone, somewhere, at some time. Development
is not unconstrained but has to begin at some spot. As Kierkegaard memorably puts it, necessity is a kind of place; to become is to move away from that place, “but to become oneself is a movement in that place” [15], p. 36. Real development is a development of the self. Every possibility has to be imagined from a given spot from which the possibility is at least remotely achievable. To become myself, I have to be comes from a situation that to some degree constrains what is genuinely possible: I have to be able to get there from here so to speak. Possibility’s despair denies this, such that any and then eventually every possibility seems equally enticing, with the ultimate consequence that the self itself becomes “a mirage” or “unreal” [15], p. 36. “What is missing” in this form of despair, Kierkegaard writes, “is essentially the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one’s life, to what may be called one’s limitations” [15], p. 36.

The tragic aspect of possibility’s despair is not that the person suffering from it fails to “amount to something in the world,” which implies that a person can in fact amount to something in the world while still having this type of despair. The person suffering from this form of despair loses herself in what Kierkegaard calls “the mirror of possibility” [15], p. 37. When looking into any mirror, he points out that one must still recognize the reflection therein as one’s own; otherwise one sees just a human face. The mirror of possibility, though, tells only a half-truth, for what one sees in it is just one profile as it were of what the self could be, not what it is entirely. Any possibility envisioned by the imagination is hypothetically possible, but not every possibility is a possibility for me, nor is every possibility one that I can act or have acted upon. “Possibility is like a child’s invitation to a party; the child is willing at once, but the question now is whether the parents will give permission—and as it is with the parents, so it is with necessity” [15], p. 37. A possibility can be immediately enticing and solicit our consent, but not every possibility is realizable—or even advisable—given the “limitations” to which a fully realized self must necessarily submit.

For the person in possibility’s despair, possibility takes no purchase on their self. It is the object of flirtation or discontent but not a functioning component of the self, not a guide to real change. As noted, such a person may very well be living a life that counts for something in the world, but they are nevertheless in despair because of yet another misrelation between themselves and the stuff of their lives, no matter how meaningful they may otherwise seem.

3.4. Necessity’s Despair

Necessity’s despair, the fourth form of misrelation, “lacks possibility” [15], p. 37. Keeping in mind the broader sense of possibility often at work in Kierkegaard’s writings, referred to above, I would argue that to lack possibility in this respect is not simply to lack a range of various options for action. Necessity’s despair thus results in a circumstance where “everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial” [15], p. 40. Necessity’s despair does not “lack” possibility in the sense that no possibilities are actually available to the self or that the self fails to perceive the availability of one set of options or another. Necessity’s despair is rather the self’s incapacity to perceive possibility as possibility. All possibilities have been rendered moot, one might say, and all actual possibilities are taken out of play by necessity’s despair. Here, again, the point of despair is not that it is incompatible with possessing goods that contribute to a meaningful life but that it inflects the way in which the self relates to those goods. For the person suffering from necessity’s despair, their possession of their own goods and relationships is a function of fate. They have them not because they have freely attained them but because their life could not be any other way. “The determinist, the fatalist, is in despair and as one in despair has lost his self, because for him everything has become necessity. He is like that king who starved to death because all his food was changed to gold” [15], p. 40.

For such a person, necessity is unable to be mitigated or tempered. A healthy disposition, according to Kierkegaard, “generally means the ability to resolve contradictions” [15], p. 40. As a healthy body notices neither a cold nor a warm draft, so too a healthy self does
not register the circumstances of their lives as rigidly non-negotiable. The fatalist is unable to leaven as it were the actual situation or panoply of goods in their possession with the balancing consideration that it is possible for them to be otherwise, even perhaps better or enriched in some way. The determinist is not just bound to regard the conditions of their existence as fated; they must also then fail to perceive the possibility that they could be different or even better. Room for improvement is thus eliminated, and hopes for a happier situation are necessarily dashed. Again, to fail to perceive possibility in this manner is not just a local failing, an inability to see that one actual situation could be different in a specifiable way; it is an inability to see that actuality can possibly be other at all.

That this is so is proven by the fact that fatalism is not the only expression for necessity’s despair. In this same form of despair, I can take up a slightly altered attitude to the certifiable goods in my life, and this attitude is what Kierkegaard calls “the philistine-bourgeois mentality,” which he says is “completely wrapped up in probability, within which possibility finds its small corner.” The philistine-bourgeois mindset does not regard life as fated, but it makes an insufficiently radical place for possibility, foreclosing the radically hoped-for, lacking any great aspiration or fear, and settling for what only the paltriest imagination can project. “Whether alehouse keeper or prime minister, he lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens” [15], p. 41. In this valence of necessity’s despair, the philistine-bourgeois person manages expectations, guiding their decisions by the dimmest expectation of what is commonplace, customary, in the general run of things and no more. Such a person may be prime minister, and yet they measure out their life with coffee spoons as T. S. Eliot so memorably put it. Again, the point here is that it is possible to have many great accomplishments and yet still be in despair because one’s relationship to those goods is one of caution and reserve, never venturing, and never expecting, any possibility that would truly revolutionize one’s life. While the fatalist’s outlook is not mitigated by possibility, the philistine-bourgeois person imagines she has controlled possibility by entrapping it within the confines of the probable, the run-of-the-mill [15], p. 41. In either case, the person trapped in necessity’s despair is blind to the full range of what is really possible, including the most radical hope of how life might be transformed for the better.

4. Conclusions

Our examination of the four forms of unconscious despair in Kierkegaard’s The Sickness unto Death showed that it is possible to relate to the objectively valuable features of human life in a variety of ways. Each of these ways implies a healthier mode of relation by indirection or inversion. It is possible to be fatalistic about one’s life; therefore a healthy meaningful life will not succumb to fatalism. It is possible to hold the actual circumstances so lightly that they are outweighed by possibilities that are forever entertained but never acted upon; therefore a healthy meaningful life will recognize the constraints operative in that life and connect possibilities to the actualities with which they are always in dynamic interplay.

So far, if these Kierkegaardian diagnoses are convincing, they seem to indicate that a subjective attitude of some kind might be an essential ingredient in any theory of meaningful living. If The Sickness unto Death is accurately describing a set of states of human affairs, then the objectivist view of meaningful life would be challenged in its contention that the presence of objective goods in one’s life is sufficient for meaning. Kierkegaard exposits at least four forms of despair that involve the self’s failure to meaningfully relate to objectively valuable features of their life. Metz’s second objection then would be somewhat blunted by a Kierkegaardian reflection on meaning in life.

It is arguable that a life of objective goods might also need a subjective component in order to be deemed meaningful. To describe such a component with a bit more detail, I will have recourse to the Kierkegaardian concept of earnestness. In his The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard does not define earnestness himself and says, as far as he knows, no one ever has; this he cites as a point in its favor, since a definition implies that it is
in principle possible to abstractly grasp the concept under investigation, but earnestness cannot be so grasped [29], p. 147. Kierkegaard likens it to love in this respect; one who is a lover cannot also be preoccupied with formulating a precise definition of love. Earnestness, like love, can only be lived to be known. Nevertheless, to “define” earnestness, Kierkegaard adopts a starting point from Rosenkranz’s *Psychology*, where the author defines disposition as “the unity of feeling and self-consciousness,” where “feeling unfolds itself to self-consciousness, and vice versa, that the content of the self-consciousness is felt by the subject as his own. It is only this unity that can be called disposition” [29], p. 148. This particular reciprocity between feeling and self-consciousness indicates an important point of moral psychology. As I will soon argue, following John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, a meaningful life is one that has to be appropriated or endorsed as one’s own. Kierkegaard here agrees with this basic point: continuing to quote from Rosenkranz, he points out that “If the clarity of cognition is lacking, knowledge of the feeling, there exists only the urge of the spirit of nature, the turgidity of immediacy. On the other hand, if feeling is lacking, there remains only the abstract concept that has not reached the last inwardness of the spiritual existence, that has not become one with the self of the spirit” [29], p. 148.

Earnestness thus is higher than disposition in that it is acquired rather than immediate, and it is the foundation of all dispositions in that it is earnestness that gives to disposition its originality. By virtue of this originality, “earnestness can never become habit” [29], p. 149. It is for this reason that Davenport has called earnestness a kind of proto-virtue for Kierkegaard; it is earnestness that lends weight and purpose to a human life. The earnest person acts as themselves, returning to their own life day by day with freshness and fidelity, always holding in creative and dynamic tension the finite and the infinite, the possible and the necessary. Earnestness is never habitual, frozen in routine, mired in fatalism, nor is escapist, in flight from the reality of the self.

Habit is only possible when repetition becomes mechanical and exact, when earnestness is lost. By contrast, “When the originality in earnestness is acquired and preserved, then there is succession and repetition . . . The earnest person is earnest precisely through the originality with which he returns in repetition” [29], p. 149. For Kierkegaard, repetition in its true sense is never brute or rote: the true repetition is the non-identical recapitulation of the same; repetition is always repetition with difference. It is earnestness that makes it possible for a person to revisit the same activities and events with originality each time, to repeat with a difference rather than slide into unthinking habit.

At the same time, earnestness is not obsessiveness or crushing seriousness about something in particular, such as the national debt, a theater performance, or astronomy; alleged earnestness about these definite areas of concern Kierkegaard condemns as “pedantry” rather than real earnestness [29], p. 149. Earnestness is neither obsessively monomaniacal nor deadly seriousness because real earnestness is not about anything; it is in its structure wholly self-reflexive. Kierkegaard writes, “This same thing to which earnestness is to return with the same earnestness can only be earnestness itself” [29], p. 149. A person can, Kierkegaard concedes, be earnest about “various things” [29], p. 150, but first she must be earnest about the true object of earnestness, and that is her own self [29], p. 150. This self-reflexive posture of the self toward her own life is the precondition for any other action and underpins the manner in which objectively valuable goods are possessed and enjoyed. Keeping this proto-virtue in mind as a way of thinking about the subjective contribution that a meaningful life arguably requires, we can flesh out yet further the features such a subjective posture might bear. Recall the first of Metz’s concerns referred to above—that theorists who call for such a subjective component have not described it in much detail. Earnestness, though, can be further described if it is the mode of living
that allows the self to avoid the fourfold despair analyzed above. Earnestness as a kind of subjective engagement or fulfillment might look like the inverse of the four forms of despair: it would not be fatalistic but would be respectful of limitations, would be attentive to the tasks of the day, would use knowledge for self-illumination, would direct feeling toward actual loved ones with whom one is in a relationship, and would recognize the capacity for change and improvement. A person living without despair, and therefore meaningfully, will not find themselves in flight from the tasks and goods attendant upon their lives, nor will they be utterly consumed by them. A person living without despair will act on what is possible for them and recognize that what is possible for them is also part of them. In short, a meaningful life would be one that has many objective goods, but it also will relate to them in functional and flourishing ways. We might say that a meaningful life will also be one that I wholeheartedly affirm as my own.

This affirmation might entail more than what analytic philosophers routinely refer to as a "proattitude." For Kierkegaard, I think it will necessitate something more like identification of oneself with the life one is living. As Rudd has noticed, a person is not leading a life just by being able to tell an autobiographical story about that life; that person must identify with the protagonist of that autobiographical story. Therefore, to develop an example he draws on from Bernard Williams, if a person works as a bank clerk but hates his job then in an important sense he does not identify as a bank clerk. As Rudd argues, such a person “needs the money that he earns, of course, so he wants to avoid getting sacked, and may even try to win promotion, but he does not care beyond that whether or not he does his job well. If he is a bad bank clerk, that does not bother him—he does not consider this to be a judgement on him qua person, only qua bank clerk, and he has no interest in being good at that” [33], p. 73. Thus, in this example, imagine that our bank clerk is in fact a talented and passionate drummer in an aspiring rock band. He can tell a story about his day job, and as Rudd shows, he might even try to do the minimum required to keep that job and advance in it because the benefits of maintaining and progressing his situation are worth it. However, they are worth it to him for reasons that have nothing to do with being a bank clerk; he needs the money to buy beer and cool clothing and new gear. What he identifies with is his being a drummer, not a bank clerk, and when he meets people at the club he tells them that what he is is a drummer, not a bank clerk.

The figure in our example has objective goods in his life: a good-paying job and career prospects. However he does not identify with these goods; he happens to have them, but they are not who he is. John Davenport also takes a similar view of Kierkegaardian identification. As he has explained: “to identify with desire A rather than B must involve more than merely having another desire to act on A. The higher-order volition is not merely a further desire or brute preference, but rather an attitude that essentially includes a non-arbitrary evaluation which itself involves ‘deciding what to think.’ Identification is a process of personally engaging the whole self through a kind of reasoning, namely an ‘interested’ or non-detached practical reasoning” [34], p. 356. On this view of identification, a person must participate in her own self, not merely be a spectator of her own life [34], p. 356. The despairing individual in each of the four cases surveyed fails to do this, and therefore, despite possessing objectively valuable goods, their lives lack meaning in the absence of a subjective identification with the lives replete with those very goods. A life of objective goods, with which I also personally and earnestly identify, could be called, in a word, authentic.

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Notes

1 See [1], pp. 6–12. He in turn refers to, among others, Susan Wolf ([2], pp. 208–213; [3], p. 304), R.W. Hepburn ([4], pp. 264–265), John Cottingham ([5], p. 31), and Berit Brogaard and Barry Smith ([6], p. 443). See Landau, [1], 6 n1. See also Garrett Thomson ([7], p. 2).

2 See for example Thaddeus Metz ([8], p. 3): “in this book I am strictly concerned to address this individualist orientation, so that another title for it could have been Meaning in a Life . . . I set aside such holist understandings of the question of life’s meaning;” Irvine Singer ([9], p. 17): “Having encountered difficulties in our search for a meaning of life as a whole, we may nevertheless hope to answer questions about the nature of a meaningful life;” Thomson ([7], p. 13: “My ultimate aim in this book is to help the reader understand and answer the questions: ‘Does my life have meaning?’ and ‘If so, what is that meaning?’”

3 Metz mentions Sartre at Meaning in Life, 4, 19, 82, 99, 117, 143, 169; Kierkegaard in passing at 19, 98, 107; and Camus at 6, 70, 241, 242 [8]. See also Landau [1], p. 258: “Many people consider existentialist philosophy to be a good source of knowledge and guidance for increasing or maintaining meaning in life. However, while there is much to learn from existentialism, if what is presented in this book is correct, several central themes in major existentialist philosophies are misguided and even harmful to those who want to promote meaning in their lives.”

4 It would be fair to say that the majority of Anglo-American analytic philosophers working on meaning in life today are naturalists. See Thaddeus Metz [10], p. 203. Exceptions include many of the contributors to God and Meaning: New Essays [11]. Metz is also responsible for the definition and general acceptance of the terms “naturalist” and “supernaturalist” in reference to differing possible positions on the question of meaning in life. His taxonomy has come to gain currency in the contemporary analytic discourse on meaning in life. The extent to which this terminology does or does not map onto larger, metaphysical understandings of naturalism and supernaturalism is a question I am not component to resolve and should not be assumed to resolve easily for readers interested in the broader philosophical debates in which these terms are employed. For Metz’s discussion of what he calls the naturalist and supernaturalist positions in reference to meaning in life, see his “Recent Work on the Meaning of Life” [12].

5 See Susan Wolf on this point in her Meaning in Life and Why It Matters [13], pp. 36–40.

6 For this terminology, see Daan Evers and Gerlinde Emma van Smeden, “Meaning in Life: In Defense of the Hybrid View” [14].

7 She aligns her method with the endoxic approach pioneered by Aristotle. See [13], pp. 10, 26–27.

8 Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening [15]. In what follows, I will refer to this text as Kierkegaard’s, even though he attributed its authorship ultimately to a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. He did so, however, at the last minute ([15], xix-xxiii), and it is generally acknowledged that, consequently, the author stands in a distinctive relationship to this pseudonym, the content of whose authorship is not generally regarded as “at a distance” from Kierkegaard’s own mind. In his journal, Kierkegaard indicated as much: “The difference from the earlier pseudonyms is simply but essentially this, that I do not retract the whole thing humorously but identify myself as one who is striving.” See Seven Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers [16], p. 6446. See also John D. Glenn, Jr. ([17], pp. 5–21, p. 5 n. 1): “As it is generally recognized that Kierkegaard ‘stands behind’ the ideas expressed in The Sickness unto Death in a sense that is not true of all the pseudonymous writings, I will dispense with references to ‘Anti-Climacus.’” Anthony Rudd follows Glenn on this score in a much more recent engagement with this text. He writes, “The Sickness unto Death is only a weakly pseudonymous work: It was not originally written with the intention of being pseudonymous, and its eventual pseudonymity does not indicate any disagreement on Kierkegaard’s part with the content of the work.” See his “Kierkegaard on the Self and the Modern Debate on Selfhood” [18]. Like Rudd, I too am trying to put Kierkegaard’s The Sickness unto Death into conversation with contemporary analytic philosophy. Given this aim, there is no need to uphold the customary practice of continuously attributing The Sickness unto Death to “Anti-Climacus” rather than to Kierkegaard himself; the textual peculiarity would only hinder and confuse the conversation.

9 See Anthony Rudd, Self, Value, and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach, Chapter One [19]. Rudd is following an inspiration from Marya Schemctman in her paper “Self-Expression and Self-Control” [20].

10 [15], p. 14. I have explained this doctrine more fully in my “Despair the Disease and Faith the Therapeutic Cure” [21].

11 [15], p. 17. Emphasis in the original.

12 For a cogent analysis of the admittedly unusual temporal structure Kierkegaard attributes to the self in this text, see [22].

13 [15], p. 25. See also his reservations about a superficial form of happiness or good fortune at The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin, [23] p. 156.

14 For more on this, see Christopher Arroyo, “Unselfish Salvation: Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Place of Self-Fulfillment in Ethics,” [24], Thomas P. Miles, “‘To Be Joy Itself’: Kierkegaard on Being Present to Oneself and Others in Faith,” [25] and Hugh S. Pyper, The Joy of Kierkegaard: Essays on Kierkegaard as a Biblical Reader [26].

15 Wolf explains the differences well in her Meaning and Life and Why It Matters [13].

16 Despite having introduced a synthetic pair consisting of temporality and eternity, Kierkegaard does not in the text advance two forms of despair relating to the terms of this duality. Why he does not do so is debated in the critical literature, but I recommend Sharon Krishek, “The Long Journey to Oneself: The Existential Import of The Sickness unto Death” [28].

17 I have elaborated on this further in my “Holy Hypochondria: Narrative and Self-Awareness in The Concept of Anxiety” [29].

18 See his article on this topic, “Earnestness” [30].
This is what Kierkegaard means by the eternal, as when Constantin Constantius claims that the eternal is the true repetition. See the asterisked footnote at The Concept of Anxiety, [23], p. 151.

[31]. Rudd is thinking of Galen Strawson, who admits to a forensic relationship with the actions of his own past but refuses to concede that he has a strong inner sense of selfhood that is continuous with that past. See his “Against Narrativity” [32].

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