CHAPTER 19

The Constitution of Purpose

Presupposes: the three-cell partition of mental features (Ch. 13, §2.3); the response-constitutive account of value (Ch. 14); the primary/added value taxonomy (Ch. 15); the great moral conflation (Ch. 16); the unified causal model (Ch. 18).

Establishes: the bipartite structure of purpose; its two constitutive forms; the division of the meaning-of-life impasse into a structural question answered here and a normative question referred to Chapter 16.

In brief. Does the universe care that you exist? No. Does that settle whether your life has meaning? Also no — the inference from indifference to meaninglessness is a non sequitur. Purpose has two parts: an object (the target) and a sense (the felt pull toward it). A map of a city is a representation; a desire to visit the city is a purpose. Two constitutive forms, aesthetic and empathic; standards borrow their pull from these. The nihilist reporting that nothing matters is the blind person concluding that colour does not exist: the modality has dimmed, not the world. The meaning-of-life impasse divides: subjectivists describe the sense, objectivists the object, hybrids the conjunction the architecture entails — and the objectivist's further question, whether a purpose is worth having, passes to Chapter 16. The response is involuntary; the world is not of our making; but the conjunction is real. It is ours.

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1 Introduction

Does the universe care that you exist? No. Does that settle the question of whether your life has meaning? Also no, and the inference from cosmic indifference to personal meaninglessness is one of the most persistent non sequiturs in the history of philosophy. The universe does not need to care for your life to matter. What matters is that you care, since your evaluative modality constitutes oriented differences in response to the world. Purpose is therefore not something added to consciousness from outside; it is constituted by the evaluative architecture the preceding chapters have developed.

The contemporary meaning-of-life debate is structured by a familiar impasse.

Naturalists hold that the universe is purposeless and that meaning is a projection of human psychology onto indifferent matter (Nagel, 1971; Camus, 1942/1955). Theists hold that purpose is a divine endowment (Craig, 2008; Cottingham, 2003). Hybrid theorists attempt to preserve both elements (Wolf, 2010). The present chapter divides the impasse: its structural half is resolved by showing that the three positions are partial descriptions of a single phenomenon, and its normative half is handed to Chapter 16. The phenomenon is one whose internal structure parallels the bipartite architecture already established for aesthetic experience, empathic experience, and certainty.

The chapter develops the object/sense distinction for purpose (§2), then integrates purpose with the hierarchy of value and the dominant purposes that shape life direction (§3). It identifies two constitutive forms of purposive orientation, aesthetic and empathic, and shows that orthotic purpose is derivative (§4). It develops the phenomenology and structural diagnosis of purpose-loss and nihilism (§5), divides the meaning-of-life debate through sustained engagement with Wolf, Metz, Frankfurt, de Beauvoir, Nagel, and Setiya (§6), and addresses objections (§7).

2 The Object and Sense of Purpose

2.1 The bipartite structure

Purpose, like every other evaluative category in the analysis, has a bipartite structure: an object and a sense. The object of purpose is the target toward which the agent is oriented — a career, a family, a cause, a creative project, a relationship. The sense of purpose is the emotional drive or orientation toward that target — the felt pull, the engagement, the evaluative response that makes the target matter rather than merely being represented.

The distinction is not merely terminological. It names two different components whose conjunction constitutes purpose and whose separation explains its absence. A person who identifies a target without any emotional engagement has a representation, not a purpose. A map

of a city is a representation; a desire to visit the city is a purpose. The difference is the presence or absence of the sense — the evaluative modality's oriented response. Conversely, a person who experiences a diffuse emotional drive without identifying a target has a mood, not a purpose. The restlessness of someone who feels she should be doing something without knowing what is the sense of purpose seeking its object.

The distinction can be stated in a sentence: the emotion we experience corresponds to the sense of purpose, while the thing we are drawn to — a family, a cause, a career — is its object. It yields a compact definition: a purpose is a desired prospect or predicted outcome, with the outcome supplying the object and the desire supplying the sense; that a purpose ordinarily issues in action is a consequence of the sense.

2.2 Structural parallels

The object/sense distinction for purpose is not an isolated observation, since it instantiates the bipartite architecture that runs through the entire evaluative framework. Aesthetic experience has an object of beauty, the sunset or the melody, and a sense of beauty, the modality's oriented response. Empathic experience has an object, the other's suffering or the friend's joy, and a sense, the oriented response to the other's state.

In each case both components are structurally required. Strip away the sense and the object remains a neutral stimulus. Strip away the object and the sense has nothing to respond to, since a detection without evaluative response is a perception rather than an experience of beauty or of empathy.

Certainty exhibits the same bipartite structure, with one refinement of its own. The object of certainty is the claim itself, the content the conviction is about, while the sense of certainty is the felt conviction, Chapter 17's emotional-pull axis. What Chapter 17's logical axis adds is not a further component but a graded status the object bears: its denial can be truly held or it cannot.

Certainty is therefore the partial instance of the pattern — object and sense like the others, plus an accuracy instrument the others lack. Rational certainty obtains when the sense tracks the object's logical status; irrational certainty obtains when the pull toward closure overrides an open status (Chapter 17, §2.3). The aesthetic and empathic cases have no analogue of this grading, which is why dogma is an epistemic pathology while there is no corresponding pathology of finding sunsets beautiful.

Purpose completes the pattern, which is an inherited partition rather than an induction over cases. It is the two axes of the mental (Chapter 13, §2.3): every feature of a mental state is a content or the orientation of one, an exhaustiveness derived rather than observed, and secure on the derived tier even for a reader who rejects the placement of feltness.

The object of purpose is therefore the content the response is directed at, the sense is the orientation; there is no third component for a purpose to have, because there is no third kind of mental feature for it to be. The survey above is display rather than proof, since aesthetic experience, empathic experience, and certainty exhibit the structure because everything mental does. Purpose is not an exception to this architecture but its most comprehensive instantiation, because the object of purpose can be anything in the agent's evaluative field — any object, activity, relationship, or goal — while the sense of purpose is the evaluative modality's sustained oriented engagement with that object.

2.3 The derivation

The derivation proceeds through four claims established in earlier chapters. All content requires distinction (Chapter 2). Consciousness is constitutively dependent on detected difference (Chapter 13). The evaluative modality constitutes evaluative difference through oriented response to non-evaluative input (Chapter 14). And the evaluative field is involuntarily constituted by the subconscious jump (Chapter 18).

From these four claims, purpose follows as a structural consequence. A conscious system with a functioning evaluative modality, operating within a field of differences, is a system for which

things matter. Its evaluative modality constitutes oriented differences (pulls toward some possibilities and away from others) and this constitution is the core of purpose. Purpose obtains when the system identifies an object and the evaluative modality constitutes an oriented response — the sense — toward that object.

The derivation's yielding this result is itself notable, because purpose might have seemed an axiological supplement added from outside. That it follows as a structural consequence matters not because the conclusion is exotic — that creatures with evaluative modalities find things mattering is familiar — but because a derivation, unlike an observation, carries commitments, and the commitments are what the rest of the chapter must defend.

Purpose, on this account, is not added to consciousness from outside. Wherever the conjunction of consciousness, the evaluative modality, and a field of non-evaluative differences obtains, purpose obtains. Wherever it does not (at zero complexity, where no differences are available; in a system without an evaluative modality; in a system whose evaluative modality has been silenced) purpose is structurally absent. Purpose is present wherever the evaluative modality is engaged with real differences. It is absent at the core of a star, in the emptiness of space, and in any system whose evaluative modality has ceased to operate.

2.4 What purpose is not

Four things purpose is not can now be stated. Purpose is not a cosmic telos, since the account does not claim that the universe has a purpose or that reality is structured toward an end. Purpose is not a divine endowment, since the first section of this book established that the grounding terminus is unintelligent and that creation ex nihilo is structurally incoherent. Purpose is not a subjective projection, since the evaluative differences the modality constitutes are response-dependently real rather than manufactured from nothing. And purpose is not a brute psychological fact, since the structural account explains why things matter to conscious systems by connecting purpose to the analysis's foundational results.

3 Purpose and the Hierarchy of Value

3.1 How the hierarchy generates purpose

The derivation establishes that purpose is a structural consequence of evaluative engagement. But purpose does not float free of the evaluative architecture developed in Chapter 15. Purpose is anchored in the hierarchy of value — the ordered ranking of objects by the intensity and orientation of the evaluative responses they elicit. The hierarchy is not merely a context in which purpose occurs; it is the mechanism through which purpose is constituted, sustained, and transformed.

A purpose is a sustained evaluative orientation maintained across time through the hierarchy of value. A passing desire is a momentary orientation — a transient evaluative response that fades with the situation that triggered it. The difference is temporal persistence sustained by the hierarchy: a purpose occupies a stable position in the hierarchy, anchored by primary and added value that resist displacement. A desire occupies a transient position, anchored by primary value alone, without the web of derived and consequential associations that sustain a purpose across changing circumstances.

Purpose admits of degrees along a single dimension: the intensity and stability of the evaluative orientation. A person whose evaluative modality responds to a target with strong, sustained, and richly associated attraction has a deep purpose. A person whose response is weaker, less stable, or more thinly associated has a shallower purpose. The degree tracks the evaluative modality's actual response rather than the subject's reflective endorsement of it: a person can articulate a purpose she does not deeply feel, and feel a purpose she cannot articulate.

Purposes conflict when two or more targets occupy positions in the hierarchy that generate incompatible behavioural orientations. A person who is oriented toward both career success and family presence faces a conflict of purposes when the two require incompatible allocations of time.

The conflict is resolved, if it is resolved, by the forced-choice diagnostic (Chapter 15): under the pressure of compelled selection, the evaluative modality produces responses of different intensities to the competing targets, and the stronger response determines the choice. The resolution may surprise the agent, since a person who believed she valued career above family may discover, in the moment of choice, that her evaluative modality responds more intensely to the prospect of her child's distress than to the prospect of professional advancement. The hierarchy reveals itself only when the choice is forced.

3.2 Dominant purpose and life direction

In any hierarchy of value, the object associated with the strongest emotional response, positive or negative, is by definition the most valuable or dominant. What the preceding chapters have not developed is the consequence of this for purpose. Whatever sits at the top of a person's hierarchy becomes her dominant purpose: the orientation that shapes not just what she chooses but who she is. Dominant purpose is the hierarchy's apex viewed from the perspective of action and identity.

Each of us lives by a unique hierarchy of values, so our decisions and life directions are shaped by factors that are dominant to us without being shared or prioritised by others. Two documented lives display the mechanism at full evidential strength; a schematic survey completes the range.

Kalanithi. Paul Kalanithi's memoir records the mechanism under the harshest available conditions: a neurosurgeon in his mid-thirties, diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer, watching his evaluative hierarchy reorganise itself under the diagnosis (Kalanithi, 2016). Two orientations dominate the record. The first is self-empathic — the drive toward survival and, as survival narrowed, toward time that mattered, the modality responding to his own suffering with an oriented pull toward its relief. The second is empathic and outward — the decision to father a child he knew he would not raise, and to write for readers he would never meet: sustained orientations toward the emotional lives of others.

The memoir illustrates the diagnostic rather than instancing it, since a single life is not the insulated repetition Chapter 15 (§4.1) requires before a compelled choice can be said to disclose an ordering rather than constitute one. It is cited for the shape of the mechanism rather than as evidence of it. The surgical career he had spent a decade building was displaced within months; the displacement arrived as a discovery about his own hierarchy rather than a decision made over it.

Frankl. Viktor Frankl's account of the camps is the classical narrative case; it is striking that the founding text of the meaning-of-life literature is a report of dominant purpose under conditions engineered to destroy it (Frankl, 1946/2006). Frankl records prisoners whose orientation toward a specific object — a spouse who might still be alive, a manuscript to reconstruct, a child waiting — organised perception, endurance, and conduct after every ordinary support had been removed. His own sustaining object was the confiscated book he intended to rewrite.

In the present vocabulary the observation is apt. The object of purpose was in each case a target in the world; the sense of purpose was the empathic or self-empathic orientation toward it; and the intensity of that orientation, delivered involuntarily, marked the difference Frankl reports in his own case and in the cases he could observe — a report from a survivor about survivors, which is why it is cited for the shape of the mechanism and licenses no verdict about those who did not survive.

The caveat entered for Kalanithi applies here with more force, since a memoir written by a survivor, about survival, is the least controlled evidence a causal claim of this shape could rest on. Frankl built a therapeutic practice on the observation; the structural account explains it. Whatever sits at the top of the hierarchy shapes conduct and identity because it commands the strongest oriented response.

The mechanism is indifferent to the content it operates on. A dominant purpose may be anchored in gratitude, in the anticipated beauty of achievement, in hope of recovery, in solidarity with the oppressed, or in the promise of salvation. The hierarchy's dominant value supplies the object; the modality's oriented response constitutes

the sense; the two together shape identity and life direction. The mechanism is the same in every case; only the content varies.

3.3 The evaluative hierarchy is involuntarily constituted

The evaluative hierarchy is involuntarily constituted. Purpose, while real, is therefore not self-authored in the ultimate sense. The agent did not choose which evaluative differences her modality constitutes most vividly, which targets attract her most strongly, or which forms of purposive orientation dominate her life. Kalanithi did not choose the force of his survival drive or the pull toward the daughter he would not raise; Frankl's prisoners did not choose which remembered face or unfinished task would carry the strongest charge. Purpose is real and purpose is theirs; it is a product of bounded authorship (Chapter 18). The implication for divine punishment — that holding agents to absolute account for purposes they did not fully author is disproportionate — is developed in Chapter 20.

4 Two Constitutive Forms of Purpose

4.1 The aesthetic and empathic constitution

The three-goodness taxonomy (Chapter 14) identifies two constitutive forms of evaluative engagement, aesthetic and empathic, alongside a third form of goodness, orthotic, that is a cognitive operation rather than an evaluative modality. A natural expectation is that purpose would exhibit the same three forms. It does, though with one asymmetry that the taxonomy itself predicts.

Aesthetic purpose obtains when the evaluative modality responds to sensory or representational content, so that the system is oriented toward beauty, harmony, elegance, or the pleasures of perception. A painter oriented toward creating a beautiful image, a musician toward producing a satisfying sound, a hiker toward experiencing a landscape: each is engaged in aesthetic purpose. A life rich in aesthetic purpose is one in which the evaluative modality is frequently and vividly engaged with the sensory world.

Empathic purpose obtains when the evaluative modality responds to the emotional states of others, or of oneself in the self-empathic case. A parent comforting a distressed child at three in the morning — the exhausted walk to the nursery, the warm bottle, the slow rocking — is engaged in empathic purpose, the evaluative modality responding not to the beauty of the task, since there is little, but to the child's distress and the parent's need to relieve it. A doctor relieving pain, a friend supporting someone through grief, a scientist who spends decades pursuing a cure for a disease affecting children she will never meet: each is oriented by empathic purpose.

Self-empathic purpose obtains when the modality responds to one's own emotional states — the desire to flourish, to feel well, to escape suffering. Kalanithi's survival drive is self-empathic purpose: the evaluative modality responding to his own suffering with an oriented pull toward recovery and, when recovery closed, toward the time that remained (§3.2).

This form, empathic purpose in both its other-directed and self-directed varieties, is the most directly connected to morality and, for many people, the form most resilient in the face of mortality. The knowledge that one's empathic engagement made a real difference to another person's emotional life is a form of significance that requires neither cosmic endorsement nor infinite duration.

4.2 Orthotic purpose is derivative

Orthotic purpose (the orientation toward conformity with a standard) is real as a descriptive category but is not constitutively purposive. This parallels Chapter 16's finding that morality is constitutively empathic and orthotic assessment is derivative: the orthotic standard codifies prior evaluative orientations rather than generating new ones.

The argument is straightforward; it is not new, since it is the grip argument of Chapter 16 (§3.1) in the key of purpose. A standard engages the evaluative modality or moves nothing, so what held for moral requirement holds for orientation toward any standard whatever.

What follows restates the point in this chapter's materials, as illustration rather than fresh proof. Purpose requires the sense (§2), while orthotic assessment does not constitutively require the modality, since a spell-checker assesses without emotion. The conformity-checking operation can therefore proceed without any oriented emotional response, and without the sense there is only a representation of a standard.

What, then, is "orthotic purpose"? A student oriented toward passing an examination, an athlete toward breaking a record, a craftsperson toward producing a flawless product: these feel purposive. But the purposive element is not the conformity-checking; it is the emotional response to conformity or non-conformity. The student feels anxiety about failure and relief at success — these are self-empathic responses (the evaluative modality responding to her own prospective emotional states). The athlete feels the pull of achievement: an aesthetic response (the beauty of the completed performance) or a self-empathic response (the desire to feel the satisfaction of triumph). The craftsperson feels the satisfaction of precision: an aesthetic response to the beauty of well-executed work.

Strip away the emotional response and the orthotic operation continues (the spell-checker still checks) but purpose vanishes. The student who checks her exam answers mechanically, with no emotional engagement, has no purpose; she has a procedure. The orthotic standard provides the object of purpose; the aesthetic or empathic response provides the sense. Without the sense, the object is inert.

The three forms therefore reduce to two constitutive forms, aesthetic and empathic including self-empathic, with orthotic purpose the application of these to orthotic targets. The taxonomy is preserved as a descriptive tool, while the purposive element is always aesthetic or empathic: the orthotic element provides the target rather than the purpose.

4.3 Living in others' minds

Human beings, among all objects of purpose, stand apart for the intensity and resilience of the responses they elicit; the account

identifies the mechanism, which is the one §4.2 fixed: another mind is the only object of purpose that is itself a register, so an orientation toward it meets a response; the object is renewed by the relationship — which is what the intensity and the resilience both come to. To live in the welcoming mind of another is empathic purpose in its most intimate form. The object of purpose is the other's awareness of you; the sense is the empathic pull toward being known, understood, and valued by that consciousness.

The object admits every configuration the social world supplies: concentrated in one person who knows you deeply, held within a family or a few friends, dispersed broadly as fame, lodged in the thoughts of someone already dead, or, for the believer, in the mind of a God who, on Chapter 24's proposal, registers without having authored. Scheffler's (2013) scenarios make the object visible by subtraction: told that humanity would end shortly after their own deaths, most people find their projects drained of point, which shows that the awareness of others, present and to come, was among their objects all along. The resilience follows from the structure. An awareness of you is an object that ongoing relationship continually renews, so the purpose it anchors is atelic in Setiya's sense (§6.3), consumed by no achievement.

The same structure explains the characteristic losses. Where the object is another's awareness, the purpose is exposed to that awareness's withdrawal: death, rejection, the erosion of memory. The loss of meaning such withdrawal produces is the collapse of an object, with the sense left seeking what it can no longer engage.

It explains, too, why love is valued as it is. Mutual awareness is the configuration in which two such objects sustain each other, granting significance under physical isolation: the soldier at war carried by the belief that he is remembered. And it explains why aesthetic engagement deepens when shared, since the empathic amplification of the aesthetic is the two constitutive forms arriving together, each supplying the other's object.

Where the argument stands: purpose has been given its bipartite structure and derived from the two axes of the mental (§2); placed

within the hierarchy of value as dominant purpose (§3); divided into its two constitutive forms (§4). What follows is what happens when the structure fails.

5 The Absence of Purpose

5.1 The phenomenology of purpose-loss

The phenomenological description that follows is not decorative; it is the evaluative architecture in action. Each sentence describes the evaluative modality's progressive dimming: the sense of purpose weakening, the object of purpose losing its emotional charge, the hierarchy of value flattening toward indifference. The taxonomy that follows is the formalisation of what this description captures from the inside.

The objects that anchor purpose vary across lives: the small textures of a day, a long ambition, wealth, companionship, art, inquiry, the natural world, the built one. The variation belongs to the object, while the mechanism is constant. A person in love shows the mechanism at full amplitude, since the modality responds to nearly everything, and a grey day carries a charge it would otherwise lack.

The mechanism at low amplitude shows the same structure from the other side. A person cut off from her future finds few responses strong enough to sustain the report that her life has purpose. As the responses dull, the smile registers as less happy and the joke as less funny; when positive response fails widely enough, the field flattens and its objects present as worthless.

At that point the sense of purpose may no longer be renewed from within, because thought after thought arrives without a positive charge attached. Renewal then often comes from outside — a friend, a family member, a stranger's kindness — supplying the field with an object vivid enough to re-engage the modality.

5.2 Three structurally distinct cases

If purpose is constituted by the evaluative modality's oriented response, then the absence of purpose admits of a sharp structural diagnosis. But the absence is not uniform. Three structurally distinct cases must be distinguished.

Case 1: Evaluative silence. The evaluative modality falls silent — true numbness, no positive or negative feelings. There is no purpose because no evaluative differences are being constituted. The person does not move toward or away from anything. She does not declare "nothing matters"; she simply does not engage. This is the structural zero of purpose: evaluative equalisation, the analogue of blindness. Just as the blind field is not darkness but the absence of the visual modality's operation, evaluative silence is not sadness but the absence of the evaluative modality's operation.

Case 2: Negative engagement. The evaluative modality is still operating while constituting only negative evaluative differences: pain, despair, anguish, repulsion. There is still purpose, though a purpose that on reflection is unwanted. The person is moved, since the negative feeling pushes or pulls. She has meaning in the formal sense; she does not want the meaning she has. A person overwhelmed by grief is purposive, since she is oriented toward the cessation of pain, while the purpose is one she would not choose if she could.

The clinical significance of the Case 1/Case 2 distinction deserves emphasis. Severe depression frequently involves the dominance of negative emotional response rather than its absence, and the person's report, "nothing matters", misdescribes her condition as Case 1 when it is structurally Case 2. She reports evaluative silence when what she is experiencing is negative engagement so pervasive that positive engagement has been displaced. The structural diagnosis matters because the interventions differ: Case 1 (evaluative silence, as in certain neurological conditions) requires restoring the modality's operation; Case 2 (negative engagement misreported as silence) requires rebalancing the modality's orientation, not restarting it.

Case 3: The purposive act of self-destruction. The person who ends her own life to escape unbearable suffering is performing a purposive act — oriented toward the cessation of suffering, which is an evaluative target constituted by the modality's negative response to her current state. Purpose is present in the act: the modality's last operation orients the agent toward the elimination of the conditions for its own operation.

The practical consequence follows the pattern of the two cases before it. The orientation is real, and the field constituting its object is the field Case 2 describes: positive engagement displaced, so what the modality has to weigh has narrowed to the suffering and its ending.

That narrowing is a state of the evaluative field rather than a conclusion the person has reasoned her way to, and a field in that state is altered as Chapter 15 (§4.4) says fields are altered — by enrichment rather than by argument. Section 5.1 has already located where the enrichment comes from once it can no longer be generated from within: another person, supplying an object vivid enough to re-engage the modality. Classifying the act as purposive therefore settles nothing about whether the orientation is to be honoured. What it registers is the constriction of a field, where the constriction is what admits of change.

The three-case analysis prevents a glib claim that meaning is always present as long as someone is alive. In Case 1, purpose is absent. In Case 2, purpose is present and unwanted. In Case 3, purpose is present in the act itself.

5.3 Engagements: Ratcliffe and Smuts

Ratcliffe (2015) provides the most detailed phenomenological analysis of how depression transforms experience: not primarily a mood but a transformation of existential feeling, the background sense of being situated in a world that matters, offers possibilities, solicits engagement, so that the world does not merely seem worse but closed.

What he identifies as the alteration of existential feeling is, in the analysis's terms, the diminishment of the evaluative modality's capacity to constitute oriented differences: the world seems closed because the

modality that would constitute its openness has fallen silent or become dominated by negative orientation. Ratcliffe's analysis therefore confirms the Case 1/Case 2 distinction, since some depressive states involve evaluative silence, where the world offers nothing, and others pervasive negative engagement, where the world offers only suffering.

Smuts (2013) identifies a persistent gap in the good-life literature, since theories of well-being do not adequately distinguish a life that is going well from a life that has meaning. The object/sense distinction fills it: well-being concerns the modality's overall balance of positive and negative orientation, the hedonic balance of the sense, while meaning concerns its engagement with real non-evaluative differences, the richness of the object.

Case 2 nihilism illustrates the distinction, since a person in pervasive negative engagement has poor well-being without being without purpose, the modality still constituting oriented differences directed toward objects. Well-being and meaning are therefore structurally distinct dimensions of evaluative life, for which the object/sense distinction provides the vocabulary for stating the difference plainly.

5.4 Nihilism as evaluative diminishment

A distinction the framework makes available must be drawn first. The nihilism described above is experiential — the lived collapse of the sense that anything matters — and to that condition the present account speaks directly, since it is a report of evaluative diminishment rather than a discovery about the world.

The analogy with blindness is strict. A person who loses her sight has not discovered that colour does not exist; she has lost the modality whose response constitutes chromatic differences. Similarly, a person whose evaluative modality is diminished has not discovered that nothing matters; she has lost the modality's capacity to constitute evaluative differences, the capacity to generate the sense of purpose. The nihilist's report, "nothing matters", is therefore an accurate

description of her current phenomenology and an inaccurate generalisation about the world.

Where nihilism is evaluative diminishment, the appropriate response is not philosophical argument, which targets beliefs, but modality-restoration, which targets the evaluative system's capacity to constitute the sense of purpose. This is consistent with clinical practice, where treatments for depression and anhedonia target the substrate of emotional response rather than the arguments for or against meaning.

The philosophical error theorist is a different case, and must not be diagnosed in this way. He advances a claim — that nothing matters stance-independently — rather than reporting a deficit, and his evaluative modality may be in perfect order. The blindness analogy does not refute him, and invoked against him it would beg the question, presupposing the response-dependent reality of evaluative differences that he denies. He is met on the merits instead, those of Chapter 14, on whether the secondary-quality model of value can be sustained. To treat his position as a condition rather than a claim would be the very error this book diagnoses in dogma (Chapter 17): mistaking a philosophical disagreement for a psychological one.

6 The Meaning-of-Life Debate Divided

6.1 The impasse

Subjective theories (R. Taylor, 1970; Frankfurt, 2004) hold that life has meaning when the subject cares about what she does. Objective theories (Metz, 2013; Wielenberg, 2005) hold that meaning requires engagement with activities that are worthwhile. Hybrid theories (Wolf, 2010) combine both. The impasse arises because each captures something real, while none explains why both elements are needed or how they are related. The object/sense distinction developed in §2 provides what the existing literature lacks: an explanation of why both components are required and how they are related.

6.2 The division

The subjective theorist is right that purpose requires the sense, the evaluative modality's oriented engagement. A person who performs objectively worthwhile activities without any emotional response does not experience purpose: she has an object without a sense. The objective theorist is right that purpose requires real differences in the object, the non-evaluative input the modality responds to. Some activities involve richer non-evaluative features than others, so the richness of the object affects the depth of the purpose constituted.

The hybrid theorist is right that both elements are needed, while treating the conjunction as a brute requirement. This account explains it. The sense of purpose is constituted by the modality's oriented response to the object of purpose, so both the modality's engagement (sense) and the input's real differences (object) are structurally required. The conjunction is entailed by the bipartite architecture rather than stipulated.

A clarification is needed about what the division settles and what it leaves open. The objective theorist's condition was not merely that the object contain real differences but that it be worthwhile. Rendering it as "real non-evaluative differences" captures the structural requirement — that purpose needs a real object — while setting the worthiness question aside. That question does not vanish, because it belongs elsewhere.

A person richly and stably engaged with an atrocious project, a life organised around cruelty pursued with ingenuity and devotion, meets the structural conditions for purpose: an object, and a sustained oriented response to it. On this account she has purpose, even deep purpose. What she lacks is goodness rather than purpose. The empathic account of morality (Chapter 16) delivers that verdict: a judgement about the worth of the response rather than about whether it constitutes a purpose.

What is resolved is therefore the structural impasse, why both object and sense are required for purpose to exist, while the normative question the objectivist also presses remains open here. Whether a purpose is worthwhile is a moral question, answered in Chapter 16; whether something is a purpose at all is the structural question answered here.

Keeping the two apart is what the account adds. The objectivist is answered on the structural question and declined on the normative one: where a purpose survives full registration, the account withholds the verdict of meaninglessness Wolf's condition was built to deliver; that is a residue conceded rather than a dispute won.

6.3 Wolf, Metz, Frankfurt, and de Beauvoir

Wolf's (2010) formulation, that meaning arises from "active engagement in projects of worth", comes closest to the present account. "Active engagement" captures the sense; "projects of worth" captures the object. This account agrees with the formula but provides what Wolf does not: an explanation of why the conjunction is necessary. Wolf treats it as an intuitive requirement. This analysis derives it from the response-constitutive architecture: the sense is constituted by the modality's response to the object, so both are required. The conjunction is not intuited but entailed.

The grass-counter. Wolf's formula carries a commitment the confirmation must not skate over, since it is the whole point of her objectivity condition. Wolf introduces "of worth" to exclude cases in which the engagement is real while its object is not: the man who lives for counting blades of grass, or who is fulfilled by memorising phone books, engages actively and is subjectively gripped. Yet his life does not thereby become meaningful. If purpose is constituted by the modality's oriented response, the worry runs, then the grass-counter has purpose in full, so the account collapses the distinction Wolf's condition was built to preserve.

Response-constitution is not response-infallibility. The reply is that response-constitution does not entail response-infallibility, and the resources to mark the difference are already in hand. An evaluative response is directed, since it registers the features of its object accurately or misreads them (Chapter 14, §6.4).

The grass-counter's orientation is therefore not validated by being felt. It is a response whose object bears none of the evaluative differences the response imputes to it — a misregistration, the purposive

analogue of the adaptive preference (Chapter 15, §6) and the manufactured added value. What Wolf records as a failure of objective worth, the analysis records as a failure of fit: the sense is real, while it answers to nothing in its object. A purpose whose object cannot sustain the significance the sense assigns it is criticisable on the account's own terms. The distinction Wolf draws by positing a stance-independent order of worth, the analysis draws within the response-constitutive architecture, by the directedness of the response, so Wolf's condition is replaced by an informed-attitude criterion that does its work without the objectivism.

This also fixes the account's exposure. It does not follow that every widely disvalued purpose is a misregistration, since the criterion is fit to the object's actual evaluative differences rather than conformity to consensus. Where an object bears the differences a purpose imputes to it, the purpose stands however unusual it looks. What is excluded is only the purpose whose object bears no such differences at all, which is the case Wolf's condition was meant to exclude, and no wider.

One step in this reply must be closed against a circle it invites. On a response-constitutive account, "the object's actual evaluative differences" cannot mean differences constituted independently of all response, since there are none, and if it means differences constituted by the grass-counter's own response, every purpose fits its object trivially.

The criterion is counterfactual and diagnostic — the informed-registration anchor of Chapter 14 (§6.5), of a piece with the tests for adaptive preference and manufactured added value (Chapter 15, §§6.6, 7.2). A purpose fits its object when the orientation survives the agent's own accurate and complete registration of the object's non-evaluative differences, so that fuller acquaintance with what the object actually contains sustains the response rather than dissolving it. The differences that do the criticising are non-evaluative and observer-available; the response that does the sustaining or dissolving is the agent's own, corrected only for accuracy and completeness, under the forced-choice conditions Chapter 15 specifies. For empathic purpose the anchor is firmer still, since it is the other's actual felt condition, observer-independent in the sense of Chapter 14 (§6.4).

The grass-counter is therefore criticisable not because grass lacks differences, since blades differ, but because the significance his sense assigns is one his own modality, brought into complete contact with those differences and with the rest of his evaluative field, does not sustain. The orientation lives on inattention, as the adaptive preference lives on foreclosed alternatives.

The account concedes the residue openly: a grass-counter whose orientation survives full registration and complete comparison has a purpose the analysis will not condemn. The outcome is one Wolf's objectivism forbids and the present account accepts, as the cost of drawing the objectivity condition inside the architecture rather than above it. Refuse constitution and keep Wolf's objectivism, and no residue is owed here, since the criterion then applied is the one the fit criterion approximates; the residue is borne by those who draw the condition inside.

Metz's (2013) comprehensive survey identifies a cluster of conditions — creativity, moral goodness, the exercise of rational capacities — that track meaningfulness across cases, and the analysis explains the cluster. Each involves rich non-evaluative differences, the objects, to which an engaged modality responds, the sense: the achieved against the not-yet-achieved, the empathic deployment, the solved against the unsolved. The cluster is therefore not a list of independent meaning-makers but a set of activities whose objects are particularly rich in the differences that engage the sense with particular intensity.

Telic and atelic. Setiya (2017) identifies a structural source of dissatisfaction the meaning-of-life literature has overlooked: the difference between telic activities, oriented toward a terminal goal that, once achieved, eliminates the activity, and atelic activities, oriented toward ongoing engagement not exhausted by any particular achievement. The midlife crisis, on Setiya's diagnosis, is the recognition that one's life has been organised around telic purposes — career goals, financial targets, milestones — that are either achieved, and therefore no longer purposive, or abandoned, and therefore experienced as failure.

The present account gives Setiya's diagnosis its mechanism through the object/sense distinction. Telic purposes are orientations whose object is consumed by achievement, since the contrast between goal and absence disappears once the goal is reached. Atelic purposes are orientations whose object is renewed by ongoing engagement, since the contrast between engaged and disengaged is reconstituted at every moment. The analysis therefore predicts what Setiya observes: a life rich in atelic purpose — ongoing aesthetic, empathic, and intellectual engagement — is more resilient against existential dissatisfaction than a life structured exclusively around telic achievement.

Frankfurt's (2004) account of caring as the source of importance converges on the central point: what matters to the agent is constituted by what she cares about rather than by an external authority's endorsement. What the structural account adds is the location, since caring is not a brute volitional fact but the sense of purpose, the modality operating on an object, within a hierarchy involuntarily constituted by the subconscious jump. Frankfurt identifies what purpose consists in; the analysis identifies why caring has the bipartite structure it does and why the agent's authorship of what she cares about is structurally bounded.

De Beauvoir (1947/1976) argues that meaning is neither given by the situation, as objective determinism holds, nor created ex nihilo by the will, as Sartrean radical freedom holds. It is, on her account, constituted by the agent's engaged response to a situation she did not choose and within which her choices are real. The parallel is close: the object of purpose is a field of differences the agent did not populate, and the sense is the modality's oriented response to that field. Her situated freedom is bounded authorship under another name, and her insistence that meaning requires both the situation, the object, and the engagement, the sense, anticipates the dissolution of the impasse.

Two further positions complete the map. Kauppinen (2012) argues that meaning is a property of temporally extended wholes, so a life's meaningfulness depends on its narrative shape and the same episode contributes differently according to the arc it belongs to. The account absorbs the insight without the holism.

Narrative shape is a real feature of the object, since a life's trajectory, its progressions and redemptions, are differences the modality registers, entering the composite as added value across time (Chapter 15, §3). That is why an achievement embedded in an ascent feels different from the same achievement stranded. What the bipartite structure denies is that the sense waits on the whole, because the orientation operates now, on an object that includes the shape so far and the shape projected. A view on which no episode's significance is settled until the story ends therefore mistakes a feature of the object for a condition on the sense.

Landau (2017) argues from the other flank that the literature has been captured by perfectionism, with standards so demanding that ordinary lives fail them by construction, and that meaning under imperfection is the real article. The account agrees and supplies the mechanism: purpose is constituted wherever the modality engages real differences (§§2–3); the engagement needs neither cosmic endorsement nor a threshold of achievement (§4.1). The perfectionist standard is one more orthotic overlay mistaken for the constitution of the thing it grades. Benatar (2017) presses the opposite flank, a pessimism on which the ledger of any life weighs negative whatever purposes it contains. The dispute is first-order, conducted within the field by the comparative machinery of Chapter 15, so the constitution account neither settles it nor stands or falls with its outcome.

6.4 Nagel and the absurd

Nagel's (1971) celebrated argument deserves its own treatment rather than being subsumed under the nihilism analysis, because Nagel's absurdist is not nihilistic. She feels the force of her commitments vividly; Nagel explicitly says that the recognition of absurdity should not lead us to abandon our projects. What she has done is detect a specific evaluative difference: the difference between the significance her commitments have from the first-person perspective and the insignificance they have from the external standpoint. This is itself a detection of evaluative difference — registered by the evaluative

modality. Nagel's absurdity is not the absence of purpose but the detection of a tension between two evaluative perspectives.

This explains why Nagel is right that absurdity should not lead to despair. The absurdist's modality is fully functional, and what she has detected is not the absence of the sense but a meta-evaluative tension available to a self-conscious system that can adopt both perspectives and register the conflict between them. The tension is real, and it complicates purpose without eliminating it, since object and sense remain. What has been added — a second-order awareness that the external standpoint does not endorse what the internal one constitutes — is itself an evaluative engagement, and therefore itself a form of purpose.

Where the present account parts company with Nagel is in the inference from "no ultimate justification" to "arbitrary". Purpose does not require ultimate justification; it requires the evaluative modality's oriented engagement with non-evaluative differences, a sense directed at an object. The absence of cosmic endorsement therefore does not make our commitments arbitrary; it makes them response-dependently constituted rather than cosmically authorised. The evaluative differences are real, the commitments based on them are grounded in the structural architecture of conscious evaluation, and the absence of an external guarantee does not diminish the differences the modality constitutes.

7 Objections and Replies

7.1 The triviality objection

Objection. The chapter establishes only that creatures with emotions care about things. This is trivially true.

Reply. The objection confuses the content of the conclusion with its derivation. The conclusion may indeed be obvious as a psychological observation, while the derivation connects purpose to the analysis's foundational results and yields consequences that are not obvious: the bipartite structure (§2), the two constitutive forms with orthotic purpose as derivative (§4), the three-case diagnosis of nihilism (§5), and the

division of the meaning-of-life impasse (§6). A familiar conclusion can have important consequences when its basis is made explicit.

What the derivation buys. The consequences can be named, and naming them completes the reply, because each is a downstream result this book actually derives and rival accounts of purpose do not deliver in this form.

The saturation argument (Chapter 20, §3) turns on the object/sense structure, since purpose persists only while the object supplies real differences for the modality to engage, which is why unbounded time threatens saturation — whereas a desire-satisfaction account, on which purpose is the meeting of preference and world, predicts no such cap for a being whose stable desires stay met. The telic/atelic mechanics inherit the same structure, since an atelic object is one whose differences are not consumed by engagement, which converts Setiya's observation into a mechanism. And the fit-criticism of the grass-counter (§6.3) requires the bipartite split to state, since fit is the accuracy of the sense's registration of its object, a criticism an objective-list account can only simulate by writing the verdict into the list.

A rival account may capture the familiar conclusion; what it does not generate are these three results, which are where the derivation delivers. Williams stated the saturation, Setiya the telic/atelic contrast, Wolf the demand for fit; what the architecture adds is the mechanism each was missing, and a chapter whose yield is a mechanism for results others stated claims that yield and no more.

7.2 The mortality objection

Objection. If purpose is constituted by the evaluative modality's engagement, and the modality ceases at death, then all purpose is temporary, so Craig's (2008) argument that mortality renders life absurd remains unanswered.

Reply. Purpose requires the modality's engagement, and permanence is no part of the requirement. The object may be permanent or temporary, while the sense operates in the present: a sunset is beautiful while it is experienced, and the beauty is not diminished by its

ending. A friendship is meaningful while it endures, and its meaning is not retroactively erased by the death of a friend.

Duration is therefore a feature of the object, and the sense imposes no such condition. Craig's argument assumes that significance requires permanence of the object, whereas the analysis holds it requires engagement of the sense — a claim this reply only separates from Craig's; the argument against the permanence premise, on the modality's own evidence, is made at Chapter 20 (§2.2); the reply here is confined to keeping duration and significance apart. A further point is developed in Chapter 20: immortality may itself exhaust purpose through evaluative saturation, the progressive diminishment of the sense as every possible object is repeated without limit.

7.3 The purpose-without-God objection

Objection. The present account may show that purpose is possible without God, but it does not show that purpose is equally rich without God (Cottingham, 2003).

Reply. The chapter is partially sympathetic. If religious practice engages the modality — through communal empathic experience, contemplative practices that heighten evaluative sensitivity, rituals that orient the participant toward differences she might otherwise overlook — it may indeed provide resources for purpose. But the resources work because they engage the sense rather than because a deity authorises the engagement, and secular practices of comparable intensity — deep friendships, artistic creation, scientific inquiry, care for the suffering — provide the same structural conditions for both object and sense.

7.4 The response-dependence objection

Objection. Purpose is constituted by responses that are themselves response-dependent. This seems to undermine the "objective" element the chapter claims to preserve.

Reply. The "objective" element is not the sense (which is indeed response-dependent) but the object: the non-evaluative differences the modality responds to. The non-evaluative differences a purpose engages

(the tissue damage, the deprivation, the physical facts of a situation) are real and mind-independent; the suffering is not among them, being a felt state and therefore on the response side (Chapter 14, §6.4). What is response-dependent is the sense — the evaluative significance of those differences. This is the secondary-quality model: wavelengths are mind-independent; colours are response-dependent; the conjunction is neither purely objective nor purely subjective. Purpose has the same structure: the object is mind-independent; the sense is response-dependent; the conjunction constitutes purpose. The experience machine (Nozick, 1974) is the sense with a counterfeit object; the fit criterion of §6.3 says why its purposes fail: full registration of what the object contains dissolves them, with no appeal to a stance-independent order of worth.

8 Conclusion

Purpose is not something the universe gives us; it is not something we manufacture from nothing. It is something that happens when a conscious system with an evaluative modality encounters a world of differences and responds. The response, the sense, is involuntary; the world, the object, is not of our making. But the conjunction is real; it is ours.

The chapter yields three results, all constructed.

The bipartite structure of purpose. Purpose has an object (the target) and a sense (the emotional orientation toward it), paralleling the bipartite architecture of aesthetic experience, empathic experience, and certainty — the structural signature of the evaluative framework applied to purpose.

Aesthetic and empathic purpose. Purpose is generated within the evaluative hierarchy and takes two constitutive forms, aesthetic and empathic including self-empathic, with orthotic purpose derivative: the standard provides the object while the aesthetic or empathic response provides the sense — an instance of Chapter 16's grip argument (§3.1). The hierarchy that generates purpose is involuntarily constituted, so purpose is real without being self-authored in the ultimate sense: a product of bounded authorship.

The meaning-of-life impasse divided. The subjective, objective, and hybrid positions are partial descriptions of a single bipartite phenomenon, the sense and the object of purpose. Wolf's formula is confirmed and structurally explained; Metz's cluster conditions are unified; Frankfurt's caring is located within the bounded-authorship architecture; de Beauvoir's situated freedom anticipates the structural account; Nagel's absurdity is reinterpreted as a meta-evaluative tension that complicates purpose without eliminating it. Nihilism admits of three structurally distinct cases — evaluative silence, negative engagement, and the purposive act of self-destruction — and is evaluative diminishment rather than philosophical discovery.

If purpose is constituted within bounded authorship, and does not require an external source to be real, what happens when it meets the theological claims that it requires God's existence, cosmic endorsement, or eternal duration? The next chapter applies the present account to these questions, along with the failure of divine retribution's desert basis and the case for restorative over retributive justice.

Grades and Dependencies

1. Stakes. All three results are *constructed* (Chs. 14, 15, 18). Kalanithi and Frankl are cited for the shape of the mechanism, not as evidence of it (§3.2). The fit criterion concedes its residue: a grass-counter who survives full registration keeps his purpose, an outcome Wolf's objectivism forbids (§6.3). The diminishment diagnosis is scoped to experiential nihilism; the error theorist is met on the merits (Ch. 14), not diagnosed (§5.4). The Premise Register carries the chain.

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