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Discussion Paper:

# Does Living Ethically Make Life Meaningful?

## An Analysis from a Kantian Perspective

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### Abstract

This study explores how people should live their lives to make them meaningful, adopting a Kantian perspective. Specifically, this paper focuses on Kant's theory of virtue and argues that we can make our lives meaningful by living ethically. In the context of the philosophy of meaning in life, this view aligns with a form of objectivism, which holds that life becomes meaningful through the achievement of moral value in accordance with objective norms. Additionally, this paper incorporates elements of subjectivism into the objectivist framework, suggesting that living an ethical life makes life meaningful, emphasizing that subjective satisfaction derived from following moral norms is combined with a meaningful life. Drawing on Kant's argument that a virtuous agent experiences a sense of self-satisfaction as a reward for leading an ethical life, this approach is termed the Kantian hybrid theory. Finally, this paper interprets life as meaningful when we are satisfied with our state of being, which results from living ethically.

Keywords: Ethics, Meaningful life, Subjectivism and objectivism, Kant, Virtue

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of meaning in life has primarily been explored through the lens of analytic philosophy. Notably, Metz's *Meaning in Life* (2013) has led several philosophical investigations into how we understand and make sense of meaning in our lives. Accordingly, *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life* (2022) shows an increase in research into this topic from various approaches. Despite its significance as a philosophical issue, however, relatively few studies have examined meaning in life from historical or classical philosophical perspectives.

This study explores how people should live their lives to make them meaningful, adopting the classical perspective of Kantian ethics while drawing on the existing philosophical framework of meaning in life. This paper aims to argue, based on Kant, that the life of

a virtuous person who lives ethically is meaningful. It explores the resources that Kant's theory provides for the philosophy of meaning in life. Accordingly, it only briefly engages with the framework of meaning in life and instead focuses on Kant's theory of virtue. Kant's theory of virtue can provide a theoretical framework for answering the question: 'Does living ethically make life meaningful or meaningless?' This question is crucial to the philosophy of meaning in life. Here, we interpret 'living ethically' as 'following moral norms, even at the expense of one's desires.' The abovementioned question can be paraphrased as follows: 'Is life made meaningful by doing what we ought to do objectively, even at the expense of our subjective satisfaction?' Kant's answer would be yes. This question is rooted in objectivism, following Metz's distinction between 'subjectivism' and 'objectivism.' How exactly would Kant fit into Metz's categories of philosophy of the meaning in life? This study aims to show that Kant's argument based on his theory of virtue can address subjective satisfaction

that makes life meaningful while following the line of objectivism.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews subjectivism and objectivism, discussing their respective strengths and limitations. Section 3 reviews several studies on the meaning of life from the perspective of Kant's philosophy and provides an outline of Kant's theory of virtue. Section 4 focuses on Kant's argument that virtuous agents attain a sense of satisfaction with themselves as a reward for consistently living a virtuous, ethical life. This sense of satisfaction, which Kant describes as *moral satisfaction*, arises from living ethically. This satisfaction is experienced subjectively; however, unlike mere sensible pleasure, a commitment to objective morality is essential to obtain this satisfaction, as living ethically is a condition for moral satisfaction. We call this position the *Kantian hybrid theory*, which is a framework that integrates a subjectivist element within the broader structure of objectivism.

## 2. Subjectivism and objectivism

In a common classification, the philosophy of meaning in life is divided into two main categories: subjectivism and objectivism. Broadly speaking, these views differ in whether the meaning of life is determined by subjective or objective factors. Subjectivism holds that a life is meaningful if the person living it feels satisfied, even if their life does not fulfill any objective standards of greatness. In contrast, objectivism holds that a life is meaningful if it is objectively great, regardless of whether the person feels satisfied. Additionally, a third perspective, known as the hybrid theory, suggests that both subjective and objective factors must be combined to determine life's meaning. Wolf, a leading proponent of this view, has contributed significantly to this strand of research. We will now examine the key characteristics of subjectivism and objectivism.

According to subjectivism, meaning in life depends on each individual's variable pro-attitudes.<sup>(1)</sup> In other words, subjective satisfaction is the only factor determining meaning in life. From this perspective, meaning in life is 'mind-dependent,' as it is determined by individuals' positive attitude. The central argument for this perspective is Taylor's (1970) discussion of the myth of Sisyphus. According to Taylor, a life spent merely rolling a rock up a hill may appear to us as soulless and lacking any impact on the world; however, if Sisyphus rolls the rock up the hill and finds joy and satisfaction in it, then his life is meaningful.<sup>(2)</sup> In other words, only satisfaction,

which depends on the individual's mind, determines the meaningfulness of life. However, this idea highlights the following shortcomings of subjectivism. If the meaning in life is determined only by the satisfaction that depends on the individual's mind, then an evil person like Hitler could be said to have had a more meaningful life than someone who devoted their life to serving others, which involves continuous struggle.<sup>(3)</sup> This conclusion seems counterintuitive, and it is difficult to conceive that the meaningfulness of life is contingent, depending on the state of the subject.

In contrast, according to objectivism, meaning in life is not determined by subjective factors, but by the extent to which a person has achieved something of objective value.<sup>(4)</sup> Objective values refer to truth, goodness, and beauty.<sup>(5)</sup> In other words, the determinants of meaning in life are independent of individual satisfaction. Therefore, in contrast to subjectivism, objectivism conceives of the meaning in life as 'mind-independent.' While what is objectively valuable may not be singularly determined, this paper focuses primarily on moral value. From the perspective of objectivism, which focuses on achieving the moral value, a meaningful life should be defined as a life dedicated to making society a better place by doing what is ethically good according to objective moral norms.<sup>(6)</sup> Metz provides the example of Mother Teresa's life as an illustration of this principle.

According to this view, our lives become meaningful when we achieve the objective value of morality, even at the expense of our subjective pleasures. This makes accepting objectivism particularly challenging, as it can seem overly demanding. It may seem excessively harsh to claim that a life is meaningless if one does not live ethically. If only an ethical life has objective value, the life of someone who has failed to live ethically may be deemed devoid of value or meaning. However, can an ethical life be approved as meaningful to a person at the expense of subjective satisfaction? Is not a certain amount of satisfaction and fulfillment necessary to make life more meaningful? As Metz (2013) and Kauppinen (2012) point out, when we talk about the meaning in life, we necessarily connote an emotional response. Kauppinen refers to it as 'feelings of fulfillment and

(1) cf. Metz 2022. Note that 'subject' here means a way of being subject that allows one to take a 'propositional attitude.'

(2) cf. Taylor 1970, 323.

(3) Metz 2013, 175-176.

(4) It is not necessary to assume that subjective factors do not influence meaning in life at all. Metz, for example, discusses meaning in life from an objectivist perspective but considers that the addition of subjective satisfactions further enhances the meaning.

(5) cf. Metz 2022.

(6) While it may be anachronistic to fit it into the framework of objectivism, I believe that even proponents like Singer, who argue that living ethically is the best way to achieve a meaningful life, would find resonance with this idea (Singer 1993).

admiration being appropriate' (Kauppinen 2012, 353). The sense of fulfillment that comes from doing what is ethically good is precisely the emotional response that justifies life's meaningfulness.

This study argues that living ethically makes life meaningful not only because it has an objective (moral) value in itself but also because it involves the sense of fulfillment and satisfaction with the self. To this end, this study adopts a classical Kantian perspective to show that an ethical or virtuous life is meaningful. It is the perspective of Kantian ethics that can provide the answer that a sense of satisfaction or fulfillment with the self is an important emotional response to the meaning in life, and that this is obtained by living ethically. This study proposes a Kantian hybrid theory that justifies, within the framework of objectivism, the idea that subjective satisfaction is an important element in making life meaningful.

### 3. The problem of the meaning of life and virtue in Kant

#### 3.1. Did Kant take issue with the meaning of life?<sup>(7)</sup>

Several works discuss Kant's philosophy and the meaning of life. For example, Godlove's (2018) 'Kant and the Meaning of Life' focuses on the argument of the highest good being the ultimate end of action and takes God as a requirement of practical reason, as developed in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). For an agent's life to be meaningful, they must promote a world in which happiness is apportioned according to virtue (cf. 05, 110)<sup>(8)</sup>. In Kant's moral philosophy, the concept of the highest good includes the idea that happiness must be distributed in proportion to virtue. Therefore, for Kant, the meaning of life is the pursuit of the highest good<sup>(9)</sup>. However, since this distribution cannot be guaranteed, Kant argues that the existence of God must be postulated. God, as the moral distributor, ensures that happiness is in proportion to virtue, thereby fulfilling the requirements of the highest good. Hence, he concludes that the meaning of life is not possible without the existence of God.

Some works have discussed the meaning of life

(7) Since the phrase used by the previous studies to which this paper refers is 'meaning of life,' this section adapts it. )

(8) Quotations from Kant's works cite the volume and page number of the Academy edition, Kants Gesammelte Schriften, ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vols. 1–29, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902.

(9) Godlove 2018, 147.

in Kantian philosophy differently, such as Church's (2022) *Kant, Liberalism, and the Meaning of Life*. Part 1 analyzes Kant's view of the meaning of life, centering on the (moral) progress of humanity as a whole rather than individual lives. As he states, 'For Kant, our lives gain meaning through participating in and contributing to relationships and institutions which aim to advance humanity's progress.'<sup>(10)</sup> He considers the meaning of life in terms of the moral purpose of contributing to the community, humanity, or the world. According to Kant, life is meaningful because it contributes to the moralization of humanity and the building of the Kingdom of Ends.

Based on Metz's categories, Kant's view of the meaning of life can be seen as a form of objectivism. However, Kant acknowledges the role of subjective satisfaction in life through ethical living, which is a subjectivist element. Therefore, this paper argues that Kantian virtuous agents make their lives meaningful by gaining subjective satisfaction through an ethical life guided by objective morality. This allows us to address the question of how subjective factors are involved in meaning in life from a Kantian perspective. This theory offers a comprehensive framework by integrating objectivism and subjectivism, both of which can be justified from a Kantian perspective.

Although categorizing Kant within the frameworks of objectivism and subjectivism in the context of the meaning of life is anachronistic, it is possible to reconstruct Kant's perspective on this topic. To this end, we will focus on Kant's theory of virtue. As Kant believes that virtuous agents are cheerful and satisfied with themselves, this argument can be connected to a discussion on meaning in life. This connection justifies the claim that being virtuous makes life meaningful, objectively valuable ('achievement of the moral value'), and subjectively valuable ('satisfaction with oneself'). In this way, the compatibility of objectivism and subjectivism can be explored. With this perspective in mind, we will review Kant's conception of virtue.

#### 3.2. Kantian Virtue

Kant discusses virtue mainly in his *Doctrine of Virtue*, stating that a defining characteristic of virtue is the 'strength' of will required to fulfill one's duty. Kant defines virtue as follows: 'Virtue is the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty' (06, 394) and 'Virtue is, therefore, the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty' (06, 405). Kant characterizes virtue as a strength because it requires an individual to maintain a moral disposition based on duty, despite the temptations of emotions and inclinations. In

(10) Church 2022, 98.

other words, virtue involves sacrificing one's subjective pleasure to fulfill objective duties.

It follows that virtue is a 'moral disposition in conflict' between duty and the inclination to rebel against it.<sup>(11)</sup> As Kant explains, 'his [i.e., human beings'] proper moral condition, in which he can always be, is virtue; that is, moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of a complete purity of dispositions of the will' (05, 84). Virtue must take the form of conflict because humans are not pure and are affected by inclinations that oppose moral laws. In other words, Kantian virtue presupposes the strength of will, as determined by moral law, and therefore necessarily involves limiting one's feelings. It requires governing one's subjective feelings through reason and objective moral norms. Therefore, from a Kantian perspective, an agent following a virtuous life obeys objective ethical rules via a strong will. In this sense, Kant's virtuous agents do not seem to fulfill the subjectivist meaning in life. At the very least, the happiness from subjective and emotional satisfaction with one's condition is not fulfilled in the moral life.

Moreover, according to Kant's critique of eudaimonism, satisfaction based on subjective feelings seems to be incompatible with a virtuous and ethical life.<sup>(12)</sup> Does the virtuous Kantian agent lead to a painful and unpleasant life at the expense of satisfaction and pleasure? Are they wholly denied the meaning in life, as subjectivism claims? However, subjective elements such as pleasure and a sense of satisfaction are not excluded from Kant's theory of virtue. As scholars like Sherman (1997) have noted, Kant did not entirely exclude emotions from the realm of morality. Kant's criticism of eudaimonism rejects the notion that happiness, understood as the satisfaction of one's inclinations, can serve as a moral principle<sup>(13)</sup>. However,

(11) In this battle, the enemy opposed to morality is inclination.

However, it is important to note that the battle is not about overthrowing inclination itself because it is 'bad.' As Kant puts it, 'considered in themselves, natural inclinations are good' (06, 58).

(12) In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, for example, Kant assumes that happiness is contingent and dependent on personal feelings and desires, which is necessarily incompatible with the objectivity of moral values. Kant discusses the critique of eudaimonism in the context of the ancient concept of happiness (eudaimonism). See Irwin's (1996) 'Kant's Criticisms of Eudaemonism' for more information.

(13) Kant's concept of happiness in his critique of eudaimonism is limited. For example, as Elizondo (2023) points out, we can see that, while Aristotle is not a eudaimonist by Kant's lights, Kant is a eudaimonist by Aristotle's lights. A separate discussion is needed to explore in what sense Kant critiques eudaimonism, but that issue lies beyond the scope of this paper.

this does not imply a complete rejection of the emotional states associated with virtue. As we will explore in the next section, some scholars have argued that the Kantian moral life involves moral pleasures such as self-satisfaction. This paper examines this argument in the context of the philosophy of meaning in life and evaluates it from the perspectives of objectivism and subjectivism. In this context, an approach based on Kant's theory of virtue can be attractive in that it defends the meaning in life in a broad objectivist framework while preserving subjective satisfaction. This is because, while respect for objective moral values in the Kantian sense is a necessary condition for a meaningful life, the subject also obtains subjective satisfaction. We call this the Kantian hybrid theory. In the next section, we defend the position that a virtuous or ethical way of life makes a person's life meaningful.

#### 4. Kantian Virtuous Agents Lead Meaningful Lives

The life of Kant's virtuous agent must be committed to objective moral values. Further, such agents must have a strong will, that is, a tranquil mind [*Gemüth in Ruhe*] that maintains that good is determined by moral law. However, this does not necessarily mean that they forgo all subjective satisfaction. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant had already indicated that the feelings associated with virtue are self-contentment. Kant says, 'I certainly do not deny that frequent practice in conformity with this determining ground can finally produce subjectively a feeling of contentment with oneself [*Zufriedenheit mit sich selbst*]' (CPrR, 05: 38). In addition, Kant suggests the presence of emotional states as analogs of happiness, distinct from happiness and necessarily associated with virtue, which he describes using the term 'satisfaction with oneself':

Have we not, however, a word that does not denote enjoyment, as the word happiness does, but that nevertheless indicates a satisfaction with one's existence, an analogue of happiness that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue? Yes! This word is satisfaction with oneself, which in its strict meaning always designates only a negative satisfaction with one's existence, in which one is conscious of needing nothing. Freedom, and the consciousness of freedom as an ability to follow the moral law with an unyielding disposition, is independence from the inclinations, at least as motives determining (even if not as affecting) our desire, and so far as I am conscious of this freedom in following my moral maxims, it

is the sole source of an unchangeable satisfaction, necessarily combined with it and resting on no special feeling, and this can be called intellectual satisfaction. (05, 117-118)

Satisfaction with oneself does not mean the pleasure that comes from the fulfillment of one's feelings and desires. Instead, it is what one can feel toward oneself with the consciousness that one has achieved freedom in the Kantian sense of observing the moral law independently of one's desires (inclination). Hence, this satisfaction with oneself is not based on emotion but accompanies virtue. Nevertheless, the virtuous person has pleasure in the moral sense. Kant further adopted this view in his *Doctrine of Virtue*, where he refers to 'a subjective principle of ethical reward: [...] that is, a receptivity to being rewarded in accordance with laws of virtue: the reward, namely, of a moral pleasure that goes beyond mere satisfaction with oneself (Zufriedenheit mit sich selbst) (which can be merely negative) and which is celebrated in the saying that, through consciousness of this pleasure, virtue is its own reward' (06, 391). This argument aligns with the idea that self-satisfaction necessarily accompanies the consciousness of virtue. According to Kant, the state of contentment can only be realized as a reward when it follows the awareness of having fulfilled one's duty through the exercise of reason. The feeling of moral pleasure as a reward occurs only as a result of virtue, meaning it always follows virtue rather than preceding it (cf. Cohen 2018, 15; Walschots 2017).

According to Kant, the virtuous agent who aims to overcome opposition in the conflict of virtue and fulfil his duty without the influence of emotion is in 'a state that could well be called happiness, a state of satisfaction and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward' (cf. 06, 377). Satisfaction, which is inevitably linked to a virtuous life, can be interpreted as making life more meaningful. Kant does not explicitly refer to this satisfaction as the meaning of life. However, in the context of the philosophy of the meaning in life, we may interpret the state of self-satisfaction derived from a virtuous life as constituting meaning in life. Therefore, we can find our lives meaningful as a reward for living an ethical life.

Moreover, in Section II of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant introduces a chapter on 'ethical ascetics,' where he asserts that one of the frames of mind to be aimed for in the cultivation of virtue is a cheerful frame of mind in fulfilling one's duties. According to Kant's theory of virtue, a virtuous agent is not in a gloomy mood and is not excluded from the joys of life. Instead, the life of a virtuous person must be cheerful, as an agent without pleasure does not have a joyous heart and, as such, is not virtuous. Kant states that 'a heart joyous in compliance

with its duty is the sign of the genuineness in a virtuous disposition' (06, 24). However, this joyous state of mind differs from mere sensible satisfaction. This state of self results from autonomous choice based on reason. In other words, the positive emotional state that results from achieving freedom based on reason characterizes a virtuous person. Therefore, virtue training should aim to achieve this state. Kant states:

The rules for practicing virtue (*exercitiorum virtutis*) aim at a frame of mind that is both valiant and cheerful in fulfilling its duties (*animus strenuus et hilaris*). For, virtue not only has to muster all its forces to overcome the obstacles it must contend with; it also involves sacrificing many of the joys of life, the loss of which can sometimes make one's mind gloomy and sullen. (06, 484)

Why should a virtuous person be cheerful? The reason isto avoid moodiness while observing one's duties. If a virtuous life were entirely painful, it would not be of any value to people and would be a life that everyone avoids. Therefore, Kant believes that a virtuous life must be meaningful and have a positive value. Kant states:

[...] if duty is not done with pleasure (*mit Lust*) but merely as compulsory service (*bloß als Frohndienst*), [it] has no inner worth for one who attends to his duty in this way and such service is not loved by him; instead, he shirks as much as possible occasions for practicing virtue. (06, 484)

Human virtue refers to a conflict between reason and emotion. Nevertheless, in the course of this conflict, one can become aware that one has overcome sensible impulses, which produce cheerfulness. As Kant puts it, 'Hence it makes one valiant and cheerful in the consciousness of one's restored freedom' (06, 485). Thus, the consciousness of freedom that arises from overcoming opposition in the conflict of virtue and establishing the self-governance of reason gives the virtuous agent a sense of satisfaction that is independent of inclinations. Virtuous agents accomplish virtue through reason, thereby achieving cheerfulness. This results in satisfaction with one's state of mind, even though it binds one's desires. This satisfaction is associated with the meaningfulness of life.

What is the source of the positive feelings of satisfaction and cheerfulness derived from being virtuous? This is undoubtedly distinct from the pleasures assumed by naïve subjectivism. A virtuous agent suppresses sensible emotions and desires in accordance with universal obligation. However, while the virtuous agent is limited in pleasure in this sense, it is somewhat

‘elevated’ by having a will determined by moral law. This concept is based on the dualistic view of humans presupposed by Kant. In other words, as a sensible being, one can feel pain, while as a rational being, one adopts a positive attitude towards self-affirmation.<sup>(14)</sup> Therefore, the Kantian virtuous agent, while limited in pleasure in the sensible sense, is full of self-affirmation as a rational being.

To sum up, Kant’s virtuous agents choose to live ethically by committing themselves to the moral law. This life may be unsatisfactory because it is limited to many subjective pleasures. However, virtuous agents experience moral pleasures that are distinct from sensible pleasures and, in this sense, they feel satisfied. In a special sense, this pleasure is an ethical reward that only a virtuous person can receive from being virtuous—i.e., living ethically. This reward can be reconstructed as one component of making life meaningful. The condition for life to be meaningful is to have the ethical resolve to continue committing to an objective moral norm using reason. While this may not be a sensuously pleasurable experience, it provides a sense of self-fulfillment. Living ethically limits some subjective pleasures and conditions commitment to objective moral values, while simultaneously, it gives the person a sense of moral satisfaction and makes life meaningful. Therefore, Kant’s theory of virtue can be construed as a hybrid theory, adding an element of subjectivism to the objectivist line.

For Kant, living ethically is right, good, and meaningful. From this Kantian perspective, two key components make life meaningful: (1) having a strong will to fulfill objective duties (objectivism) and (2) achieving a sense of satisfaction in one’s state of mind (pro-attitude; subjectivism). This Kantian hybrid theory of meaning in life can serve as a theoretical basis for the claim that ‘ethical life is meaningful.’

(14) ‘As submission to a law, that is, as a command (indicating constraint for the sensibly affected subject), it therefore contains in it no pleasure but instead, so far, displeasure in the action. On the other hand, however, since this constraint is exercised only by the lawgiving of his own reason, it also contains something elevating [Erhebung], and the subjective effect on feeling, inasmuch as pure practical reason is the sole cause of it can thus be called self-approbation [Selbstbilligung] with reference to pure practical reason, inasmuch as he cognized himself as determined to it solely by the law and without any interest, and now becomes conscious of an altogether different interest subjectively produced by the law, which is purely practical and free’ (05, 80-81). This could be reconstructed from the feeling of ‘respect,’ which Kant discusses in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. However, since this section aims to examine why virtuous agents have a pro-attitude, we will leave that argument aside.

## 5. Conclusion

Kant did not explicitly claim that only a virtuous life is meaningful. However, by applying Kant’s theory of virtue to the philosophy of meaning in life, the Kantian hybrid theory proposed in this study argues that we can make our lives meaningful by living ethically. Kantian hybrid theory presupposes a commitment to the position of objectivism in a broad sense, in that it holds that a good and meaningful life is one in which one continues to fulfill acts that involve objective moral values, while simultaneously asserting that such a life is accompanied by subjective satisfaction. Therefore, this study posits that for life to be meaningful, it must be accompanied by subjective satisfaction, which is attained through ethical living. The Kantian hybrid theory supports the interpretation that meaning in life is a combination of objective moral values and subjective moral satisfaction. In this sense, a virtuous Kantian agent is able to make their life more meaningful because one of the best ways to make life meaningful is to live ethically.

However, this paper leaves a few issues unresolved. While this study concludes that living ethically, according to Kant’s theory of virtue, makes life meaningful, this is only a Kantian response. It does not fully address the implications of this conclusion for the broader philosophical discourse on the meaning in life currently under discussion. In addition, the connection between a good life, happiness, and the meaningfulness of life has been a topic of discussion in eudaimonistic ethics since ancient Greece, with thinkers such as Epicurus, the Stoics, and Aristotle. Nevertheless, despite disagreements regarding the scope of ethical life, some thinkers believe that this is the path to achieving a meaningful life. At the very least, the conclusion of this paper provides a critical perspective when considering the issues of meaning in life and ethics.

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