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ATTRACTION, AVERSION, AND MEANING IN LIFE

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The state that philosophers call "desire" comes in two kinds: attraction and aversion. When we are attracted to something, we are "pulled toward" it: we regard it in a positive way. (Think of the desire for a delicious meal or the desire to view a great work of art.) When we are averse to something, we are "pushed away" from it: we regard it in a negative way. (Think of the desire not to be rejected or not to be covered in spiders.)

Writers in the tradition routinely marked the distinction, often writing as if "desire" and "aversion" (or "love" and "hatred") were a pair of distinct attitudes that together supply the fuel for activity fueled by passion.[1] But contemporary theories of desire have paid scant attention to the distinction. Some philosophers are skeptical that the distinction exists at all. Is there really a difference between, say, being attracted to fame and being averse to ordinary anonymity?[2] Descartes did not think so:

> I know very well that in the schools, that passion which tends to the seeking after good, which only is called desire, is opposed to that which tends to the avoiding of evil, which is called aversion. But seeing there is no good, the privation whereof is not an evil, nor any evil taken in the notion of a positive thing the privation whereof is not good. For example, that in seeking after riches, a man necessarily eschews poverty; in avoiding diseases, he seeks after health; and so of the rest.[3]

1 See, for example, Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.3.3.3.

2 According to Sumner, for instance, what I am calling "attraction" and "aversion" are really just two ways of representing the same attitude. A negative desire that [It does not rain this afternoon], says Sumner, can be represented either as an "aversion" to [It rains this afternoon] or an "attraction" to [The weather is dry this afternoon]. But "all three of these alternatives come to the same thing: that is, your positive desire is satisfied, your negative desire is satisfied, and your aversion is frustrated by exactly the same state of affairs (a rain-free afternoon).... Nothing seems to be gained by introducing the negative element" ("The Worst Things in Life," 428–29). Kagan has also rejected the relevance of the distinction for theories of well-being: Kagan, "An Introduction to Ill-Being," 270–71.

3 Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, PA a.87.

Moreover, even if the distinction is real, it is not obvious why we should care about it. It is arguably irrelevant to the empirical explanation of action, since for that purpose an undifferentiated notion of gradable desire (or preference) seems to suffice. Regardless of whether one is "attracted" to fame or "averse" to anonymity, one prefers fame to anonymity, and this preference may suffice to explain why one pursues fame as one does. And for the same reason, the contrast may be irrelevant to the normative theory of rational choice. Subjective utility and its variants are defined in terms of an undifferentiated notion of preference, so if the theory of rational choice tells us to maximize utility, it may not care whether the preferences it takes as input amount to desires or aversions.

I argue that one reason to think there is a difference between attraction and aversion, and to care about the difference, is that attractions and aversions contribute in radically different ways to our well-being. Attractions play an essential role in the good life; in particular, they are critical to the experience of meaning in life. By way of preview, consider a predominantly aversion-driven life—the life of, say, a college professor who is motivated to perform well primarily by an aversion to failure and indictment rather than any positive attraction to the elements of her job. She shows up to teach only to avoid getting fired; grades her students' work only to avoid their anger; does her research only because she fears insignificance; and so on. Every action is taken only to avoid something worse. Notably, her life may have a high level of desire-satisfaction overall; we may suppose her desires are exhausted by various aversions, and that her aversions are all satisfied in the end.[4] But clearly, something is missing. Such an aversion-driven life feels grey and meaningless at best (filled with anxiety and desperation at worst). It is natural for her to wonder even as she is making progress in fending off the objects of her aversions: "What is the point of all this? Once I have averted the evils of failure and indictment, then I will be left with . . . what?"

Contrast this life with the life of the professor who is genuinely attracted to aspects of her work; the professor who does her job because she is pulled forward by the appealing prospect of a job well done. This professor's life may not be perfect, but it will not strike her as empty in the same way. For someone's life to feel meaningful to her, I argue, she must be genuinely attracted to what she

4 Like Pallies does in "Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires," I call aversion "satisfied" if the state of affairs to which the relevant person is averse does not obtain. So an aversion to being covered in spiders is satisfied insofar as one is *not* covered in spiders and frustrated insofar as one is. One could sensibly adopt the opposite terminological convention of calling an aversion "satisfied" if the state of affairs one is averse to does obtain, as Kelley does in "Well-Being and Alienation" and Heathwood does in "Ill-Being for Desire Satisfactionists."

is pursuing, not merely averse to the alternatives (or lacking in affective desire altogether). If that is right, there must be a real difference between attraction and aversion.

Moreover, the distinction must matter for philosophy. Our two professors differ in well-being because the desires that move them differ in "quality." The theory of well-being thus needs the attraction/aversion contrast even if other parts of philosophy and psychology do not.

But then we want a theory of the distinction—some account of how being attracted to *p* differs from being averse to not-*p*—that puts us in a position to understand the distinctive connection between attraction and this aspect of well-being. What is it about the nature of attraction that explains why attraction-driven activity is valuable? I sketch a theory that illuminates the contribution of attraction-motivated activity to felt meaning.

1. Attraction, Aversion, and Well-Being

It is not hard to glom onto the distinction between attraction and aversion using examples. Consider two ways of being at a party. You see someone across the room, are drawn to them, and approach them; alternatively, afraid of seeming antisocial, you approach them. In both cases, you walk across the room because you want to talk to the person on the other side. But in the first case, you do so because you are attracted to talking to them (and to what might happen if you do), whereas in the second case, you do so because you are averse to not talking to them (and to what might happen if you do not). As Sinhababu observes, attraction and aversion are associated with different emotional syndromes:

> Some desires, like the desire for a delicious meal, give us a delighted happy feeling when we find that we can satisfy them and an unpleasant feeling of disappointment when we discover that we cannot. Others, like the desire not to miss one's flight, give us the pleasure of relief when we find that we can satisfy them and an unpleasant feeling of anxiety or dread when we discover that we cannot. This gives us reason to divide the category of desire into two subcategories, positive desire and aversion.[5]

Of course, not every desire is easily sorted into one of these two bins. Many real desires are mixtures of attractions and aversions. For instance, my motivation to do a good job teaching my classes this semester combines my positive regard for some aspects of the job (benefiting my students, doing a job I can be

5 Sinhababu, "The Humean Theory of Motivation Reformulated and Defended," 490.

proud of) and my negative regard for others (harming my students, doing a job I would be ashamed of). Just as the net force acting on an object is the vector sum of all the forces acting on it, which may point in opposite directions, the total strength of a preference for *p* is the sum of one's attractions and aversions to features of *p* and the alternatives (along with nonaffective sources of desire if such there be). And in normal cases there will be forces of both sorts.

For the purpose of explaining action, it may be that all that matters is the strength of one's preference for performing the action over the alternatives, regardless of how the aversions and attractions combine to produce this preference. Indeed, the action in both versions of the party scenarios (walking across the room) can be explained by the existence of a preference to speak to the stranger on the other side and a relevant means-end belief, without invoking the presence of an attraction or aversion specifically. Still, there seems to be a difference in the kind of desire that motivates in each scenario.

But there is a reason for insisting that the distinction is real that goes beyond the fact that it certainly seems real on reflection. To see this, we turn our attention to an area of philosophy in which it clearly makes a difference: the philosophy of well-being. The stark contrast between an aversion-driven life and an attraction-driven life indicates that attraction and aversion contribute in radically different ways to well-being.[6] But how do we characterize the contribution that attractions make to well-being in positive terms?

Two ideas may come to mind. Perhaps there is something valuable about attraction *satisfaction*, compared to aversion satisfaction. Or perhaps the attraction-driven life normally contains more pleasure than the aversion-driven one. I will argue that neither of these proposals fully captures the positive contribution of attractions to well-being.

According to the first proposal, having attractions and satisfying them is intrinsically good for us in a way that satisfying aversions is not. This thesis—a modification of the desire-satisfaction theory of well-being—has recently been developed by Daniel Pallies, who argues for one of the conclusions I will be defending: that attraction and aversion must be psychologically real given their

6 In making this claim, I am adding to a growing chorus of philosophers who argue that the difference between attraction and aversion is real and matters for the philosophy of well-being. See Pallies, "Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires"; Heathwood, "Ill-Being for Desire Satisfactionists"; Kelley, "Well-Being and Alienation"; and Mathison, "Asymmetries and Ill-Being." However, these philosophers have focused primarily on the relevance of the distinction for the desire-satisfaction theory. I aim to show that the distinction matters for theories of well-being that emphasize meaning in life as a dimension of prudential value.

different contributions to well-being.[7] According to Pallies, while satisfying attractions is intrinsically good for us, having aversions and satisfying them is merely not bad for us (though failing to satisfy them is positively bad).

Pallies's thesis can be spelled out as follows. Suppose you start off indifferent to whether *p* in a world in which *p* is true. If you then come to be attracted to *p*, your satisfied attraction adds to your well-being relative to this baseline. For example, if you are attracted to being famous and achieve fame, this is better than being indifferent to fame and nonetheless achieving it. In contrast, a satisfied aversion to *p* adds nothing to your well-being relative to a baseline of indifference to *p*. If you are averse to being covered in spiders, and you are not covered in spiders, then this is no better for you than if you were indifferent to being covered in spiders (and not covered in spiders). In other words, satisfying an aversion cannot raise your well-being above 0; it can only keep you out of the negative range, whereas satisfying an attraction can take you into positive territory, assuming that indifference constitutes neutrality.[8]

Pallies's proposal can explain why the aversion-driven life is low in well-being: the person's desires are all aversions, so their satisfaction does not add positive well-being to the life. Pallies's proposal is moreover plausible (*modulo* the usual reservations about any desire-satisfaction theory of well-being), and if it is correct, it provides an excellent reason for believing in the reality of the distinction and seeking an account of what it comes to. But it does not tell the whole story regarding the contribution of attractions to well-being. Pallies's theory is a desire-satisfaction theory; it explains why *satisfied* attractions contribute distinctively to well-being. But attractions contribute to well-being in ways that do not depend on whether we secure the object of our attraction, whereas aversions (satisfied or otherwise) cannot play this role. Pursuing attractions (but not aversions) contributes to well-being in a way that is not reducible to the value of desire satisfaction.

To see this, consider normally attraction-driven pursuits like preparing a delicious meal, working on a novel, solving a deep philosophical puzzle, or bringing about an attractive moral ideal. (To be clear, such pursuits could be motivated entirely by aversion to the absence of the good, but let us imagine attraction-driven versions of them.) The well-being contributed by these

7 Pallies, "Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires."

8 Interest in the distinction between attraction and aversion for the desire-satisfaction theory arose in part from the need to develop an account of ill-being, as emphasized by Kagan in "An Introduction to Ill-Being," 263. See Heathwood, "Ill-Being for Desire Satisfactionists"; Kelley, "Well-Being and Alienation"; and Mathison, "Asymmetries and Ill-Being" for aversion-based accounts of ill-being within the context of the desire-satisfaction theory, developed in response to Kagan's challenge.

projects does not accrue to us only after the attraction is satisfied. Rather, the pursuit of the goal one finds attractive is already intrinsically good for us. One benefits simply from being "pulled forward" by an attractive vision—the creation of the delicious meal, solving the deep puzzle—even before the attractive goal is realized—indeed, even if it is never realized. It is true that such pursuits often involve episodes of local attraction-satisfaction, as one makes progress. But the value of the pursuit is not reducible to these episodes of local satisfaction. Attraction-driven pursuits contribute to our well-being even when we are in between such episodes.[9]

In contrast, pursuits motivated by aversions do not intrinsically contribute to well-being in this way. We do not get a positive welfare boost from aversion-driven pursuits like making a divorce as painless as possible, ensuring that no shame is ever brought to our family, or working to solve a persistent health problem. These things feel like grim chores. Of course, since it is often better for us if an aversion is satisfied rather than not satisfied, it is instrumentally valuable to pursue its satisfaction. But the pursuit is not intrinsically good for us in a sense in which attraction-motivated activity palpably is.

It should be acknowledged that not all attraction-motivated pursuits make a net positive contribution to well-being. In some cases, it would be better for us on the whole if we could rid ourselves of an attraction—e.g., if the attraction is too obsessive or if it has no hope of being satisfied. (Someone who is hopelessly pursuing the dream of becoming a famous athlete but perceives no progress toward the goal and does not find training rewarding would probably be better off without the attraction and the activity it motivates.) The claim is rather that under certain conditions—when the attraction is not too obsessive, when we make consistent progress, when we experience episodes of hope, and so on—attraction-motivated activity benefits us in a way that is not reducible to the benefit that would accrue from satisfying the attraction. Pallies's modified desire-satisfaction theory of well-being cannot fully capture this distinctive contribution of attractions to well-being.

Another time-honored strategy for explaining how and why attraction contributes distinctively to well-being points to an alleged connection between attraction and pleasure or enjoyment. It may well be true in general that we take pleasure in the pursuit (and attainment of) ends to which we are attracted and that we take less pleasure in avoiding what we find aversive. But attraction contributes to well-being in ways that this observation cannot explain.

9 Indeed, in some cases, securing the aim can be in tension with the relevant good, if there is nothing left to pursue or maintain. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

To see this, observe that while attraction-driven pursuits are often pleasurable, they can also be associated with significant stress and even boredom. It is often clear we could obtain more pleasure by doing something else. A student pianist's long hours of repetitive practice may bring him some pleasure as he notices the progress he is making, but he could certainly accrue more pleasure in the same amount of time by going on vacation. Yet the pursuit of the end he finds attractive is intrinsically valuable for him *in a way* that the idle pleasure of the vacation is not, even during the stretches in which he accrues little pleasure from the pursuit. The same can be said of stressful or difficult pursuits like climbing a mountain, understanding a complicated piece of philosophy, or pursuing success or fame. These activities are not always pleasurable in the moment (and are sometimes positively unpleasant); but they are valuable whenever they involve being drawn forward by the attraction.

Another way to develop the point is to note that an attraction-driven life that lacks much pleasure need not be empty or tedious in the way the aversion-driven life is. Consider the stereotypical "tortured artist" who is intensely attracted to creating a great work of art but is constitutionally melancholic. While it would be better if she enjoyed her pursuit, her life is not empty. She is drawn forward by an attractive vision and hence has something the aversion-driven professor does not. The question that arises in the case of aversions—"What is the point of all this? Once I have avoided the greater evil, then I will be left with … what?"—does not arise for her: her purpose is to bring about something of positive value, which goes beyond (let us assume) the privation of evil; and insofar as she is moved by this purpose, her striving will seem to her to have a point.[10]

Of course, it is hard to see how an attraction-driven pursuit that involves no pleasure at all could be good for a person. Suppose someone spends hours and hours training to be an athlete but never gets better; suppose she does not intrinsically enjoy the training and does not indulge in any pleasurable fantasies. At some point, this pursuit no longer adds to her well-being. And this is not just because the positive contribution is outweighed by the negative—rather, it stops generating positive value at all. Does this suggest that attractions must generate some pleasure to be a source of value—at least, the pleasure derived

10 What is more, an aversion-driven life need not be lacking in pleasure. The pursuit of aversions can be associated with a kind of pleasure: the pleasure of relief. See Sinhababu, "The Humean Theory of Motivation Reformulated and Defended," 490. Fearful of failure, each sign that I am likely to succeed brings me a pleasurable episode of relief. But of course, the addition of many such episodes of pleasurable relief does not eliminate the grimness of a life driven entirely by aversions.

from the moments in which the aim and one's efforts come together in a single consciousness or in which one vividly experiences the appeal of one's goal?[11]

Even if such episodes of positive affect are necessary for the pursuit of an attraction to have value (*pace* the moral of the tortured artist case), this would not entail that the value of the pursuit is reducible to these episodes. As just noted, sometimes many hours of arduous training, often unpleasant, are required before the activity becomes enjoyable; but this sort of disciplined activity, driven by attraction, can be good for a person in a distinctive way well before she finds it pleasant.

Moreover, we can explain why such moments may be an essential component of valuable attraction-motivated pursuits without invoking pleasure. We might say: episodes of positive affect play an important epistemic role. Arguably, during such moments, one is vividly aware in a quasi-perceptual way of the goodness of the object of attraction. (I say *quasi*-perceptual since the object of attraction is normally an as-yet-nonexistent state of affairs, in which case there is no question of literally perceiving its goodness. Yet the state is perception-like in being a phenomenologically vivid presentational state that is distinct from any judgment or belief we might form about its content but that nonetheless normally informs a belief that matches it in content.) When we see a surface as red, we normally take it to be red if the question arises; likewise, when we experience positive affect toward a prospect, we experience it as good and so normally take it to be good if the question arises. These episodes are thus a source of confidence if we come to question the positive value of what we do, even if they are not themselves a source of value.

These considerations show that attractions contribute to well-being in a distinctive way that is not fully captured by Pallies's modified desire-satisfaction theory of well-being or by the fact that activity motivated by attraction is (sometimes) enjoyable. This gives us strong preliminary reason to believe in the reality and importance of the distinction—that the "seeking of the good," whatever this amounts to, must be distinct from the "avoiding of evil"—and to seek a new account of the distinctive value of an attraction-driven life.

2. Attraction and Meaning

Let us start with a clearer characterization of what it is exactly that is good for us when we are pulled forward by attraction. This much is apparent from the preceding discussion: it is not simply *having* attractions that is valuable; the attraction must motivate activity. The value is realized by doing things aimed at

11 Thanks to Daniel Pallies for pressing me on this point.

furthering an attractive vision. Someone who is attracted to a goal but cannot (or will not) do anything about it and so sits back and waits to see what happens does not attain the prudential benefit.

What is distinctively good for us in the cases we have been discussing is *attraction-motivated activity*: activity that is motivated by our experience of the appeal of something, which is accompanied by episodes of hope that the attraction will be satisfied, perceived progress, and so on. The prudential value of attraction consists in being *drawn forward* by an attractive prospect.

There may be limiting cases in which an attraction contributes to well-being without motivating activity. Suppose that someone is attracted to a particular country's winning a war or the success of a certain sports team. Because the outcome is outside of his control, he can do nothing to further the attraction. But he follows the events closely in the newspapers, is conscious of progress toward the goal, and experiences episodes of hope. This sort of engagement may be meaningful in a sense, but this is because it inherits many of the features of attraction-motivated activity by virtue of his identification with the country or sports team. The attraction still involves a kind of "forward motion," experienced vicariously through the efforts of the country or team, and is hence very different from the case of an idle attraction that affords no opportunity for progress. The good is not just that the Yankees win; it is that one experiences a Yankee win, and the typical fan is active to some extent in pursuit of that goal by watching the game, attending closely to it, etc.[12]

To be clear, it is not strictly necessary that the good lies in the future for attraction-motivated activity to have this distinctive value. The prudential benefit of pursuing an attraction can be attained, for example, by maintaining an existing state of affairs rather than pursuing one that is yet to be, as when one works to maintain a valuable relationship. Such activity still aims at the good, by preserving it. Nevertheless, one must see oneself as *involved* in the good in some way, whether it be its acquisition, promotion, or sustenance.

So far we have been speaking in general terms about the prudential "value" of activity fueled by attraction. My more specific hypothesis is that the contribution of this activity to well-being is best captured using the language of

12 We might elaborate the link between valuable attraction and activity as follows. As human beings, we are condemned to act; action and choice are unavoidable aspects of the human condition. The value of attraction lies in what it makes possible regarding the teleological structure of action—what it permits regarding the purpose or reason for which we act. Assuming that attraction involves seeing its object as good in some way, attraction allows us to act for the sake of the perceived good, not merely the lesser evil; and this goes some way in resolving the distinctive malaise associated with one's activity feeling "pointless" in some hard-to-pin-down sense. Exactly what this amounts to remains to be seen, but it seems to capture the essential idea.

meaning. In characterizing the predominantly aversion-driven life, we naturally reach for this language. A life spent in pursuit of the lesser evil is not just lacking in pleasure; it feels "meaningless," "gray," and "empty." The experience of meaning in life requires activity fueled by a passion that leads us to seek the good, as it were, not merely the avoidance of evil.

Many philosophers have argued that felt meaning, as distinct from pleasure, is an important component of the good life. A life of idle amusement may be enjoyable, but a person living such a life may reasonably feel unfulfilled. "Subjective meaning" refers to the state of mind that is conspicuously missing in such cases. Subjective meaning is a subjective good (or the subjective component of a hybrid good)—a good that is (at least partly) realized in conscious experience. As Wolf has observed, when we complain of lacking meaning, we are often expressing dissatisfaction with the subjective character of our lives:

> When thinking about one's own life … a person's worry or complaint that his life lacks meaning is apt to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the subjective quality of that life. Some subjective good is felt to be missing. One's life feels empty.[13]

Pleasure is not sufficient for subjective meaning, nor is it necessary. A person's life may feel fulfilling even if it lacks much pleasure (as in the case of the tortured artist). The experience of meaning is a subjective good, but it is not good in virtue of its hedonic quality.

Among those philosophers who believe that subjective meaning is a component of the good life, many claim that what is required for subjective meaning is being sufficiently absorbed in, gripped by, or passionate about one's projects. For example, Taylor emphasizes passionate desire, noting that if the gods were to inject Sisyphus with some substance that gave rise to an obsession to roll stones, his life would become meaningful in the only possible sense—it would be meaningful for him.[14] Wolf emphasizes "active engagement" in projects of worth.[15] And Kauppinen emphasizes goal-directed activity by seeing meaning as a function of the structure of the agent's goal-directed activities: "Life is ideally meaningful when challenging efforts lead to lasting successes."[16]

But I claim that passionate involvement in projects is not enough for subjective meaning, since passionate involvement can be fueled entirely by aversion, and when it is, it does not bring fulfillment. Someone might have an intense

13 Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, 11.

14 Taylor, *Good and Evil*.

15 Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning."

16 Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time," 346.

aversion to failure and insignificance that motivates intense engagement in writing a book. Night after night, she works on the book, editing and rewriting, fearful that her efforts will come to nothing. Though she is absorbed in and passionate about her project and not at all "bored" in the traditional sense, there is still a grayness to her pursuit: she could reasonably complain that her work feels meaningless. ("And when I'm done, what then? I will have avoided the evils of failure and insignificance only to find myself with ... what?")

Of course, as this example shows, attractions are not necessary for being busy; an aversion-driven person might be thoroughly busy avoiding what she is averse to, like someone constantly running from a tiger. Her life is thus not "empty" or "boring" in one sense. But it can still *feel* empty and unfulfilling. This kind of emptiness is associated with existential unease or deep boredom—the unease we voice by asking, "What's the point of all of this? Why not surrender to the tiger and get it over with?" This is the kind of questioning that an aversion-driven life prompts.

This deep boredom is nicely expressed by Maria von Herbert in a letter to Kant, where she describes an unbearable emptiness resulting from a lack of attraction:

> I feel that a vast emptiness extends inside me, and all around me—so that I almost find myself to be superfluous, unnecessary. Nothing attracts me. I'm tormented by a boredom that makes life intolerable. Don't think me arrogant for saying this, but the demands of morality are too easy for me. I would eagerly do twice as much as they command. They only get their prestige from the attractiveness of sin, and it costs me almost no effort to resist that.[17]

Without attraction, von Herbert felt "superfluous," "unnecessary," and deeply bored. This is another way of saying that her life felt meaningless; and it was meaningless in virtue of the fact that nothing *attracted* her. The problem could not be fixed by giving her new aversions and the opportunity to satisfy them, even if they were to generate passionate involvement in the avoidance of the bad.

It is important to stress that attraction-driven activity does not just forestall existential boredom and so *prevent* a bad. That is consistent with its being of no positive welfare value in itself. The claim is that attraction-driven activity blocks existential boredom by replacing it with its opposite: positive engagement with one's life and its content, a kind of positive motivational interest. This kind

17 As quoted in Langton, "Duty and Desolation," 493.

of motivational interest is not always pleasurable but can generate subjective meaning even when it is not pleasurable.

But why exactly should pursuing attractions be associated with meaning in a way that pursuing aversions is not? The relation between attraction and felt meaning becomes clearer if we take seriously the idea that attraction is a passion that tends toward the "seeking after good" and aversion only toward the "avoiding of evil," *and* we provisionally assume (*contra* Descartes) that the two are not equivalent. One way to spell out this idea is to say that attraction and aversion have positive and negative normative content, respectively. When we are attracted to something, we see it as good, and when we are averse to something, we see it as bad. The experience of meaning in life seems to have something to do with connecting to positive value. If attractions represent their objects as positively good, it is not mysterious why pursuing attractions brings meaning: in pursuing attractions we are drawn forward by the perceived goodness of our end, something that gives us a reason to be glad to be alive. The goodness we see beckons us, pulling us forward and imbuing our activity with a positive point.

Since aversions do not represent their object as positively good, rather only the alternatives as bad, aversion-motivated activity does not make us feel connected to any positive value. In a case of pure aversion, the best-case scenario is that we succeed and preserve a situation that we take to be the "zero point"—a state of affairs about which nothing positively good can be said. The "emptiness" of such a life is the felt detachment from positive value: one sees the world as devoid of opportunities to involve oneself with goodness.

Consider that when we see ourselves as pursuing a prudential good, we see ourselves as creating or sustaining value that redeems our existence to some extent. A purely aversion-driven life prompts a certain kind of questioning: we wonder what the "point" of it all is. ("And once I have avoided the evils of failure and misery, then I will find myself with . . . what?") What we seek in this questioning is a reason to exist or to be glad that one exists and will exist. But so long as only personal or prudential value is on the scene, only positive goods can do this. A life devoted entirely to preventing prudential bads involves nothing that would constitute a positive reason to carry on or to be glad that one exists. The avoidance of various forms of badness is not something that makes life worth living; it is at best neutral. (We can avoid them simply by ceasing to exist; hence, they give us no reason to carry on.) This is why von Herbert's existence struck her as "superfluous": bereft of attraction, she had nothing that constituted a reason to go on.

Of course, not all attractions are directed at prudential goods, and not all aversions are directed at prudential bads. We can be attracted to world peace or averse to general ill-being. The story I just told is not straightforwardly

applicable in such cases, since the elimination of an objective bad may be something that does give us reason to go on, since our existence is necessary to eliminate it. I will have more to say about this shortly. First, let me address a different objection that may arise.

The preceding argument seems to imply that pursuing attractions is *always* meaningful. If seeking after the perceived good is what brings us meaning, and pursuing attractions always involves pursuing a perceived good, then pursuing attractions should always generate some meaning. But this may seem implausibly strong. When someone is attracted to the prospect of eating a delicious ice cream cone, and this motivates her to seek one out, she achieves nothing, it seems, that merits the name "subjective meaning" or "fulfillment."[18]

But why not think the pursuit of the ice cream brings a *little* meaning, however trivial? Of course, a person who worries or complains that his life lacks meaning will not be relieved of the concern simply by pursuing ice cream. But this is because meaning comes in degrees, and this pursuit is hardly enough to take a life from "meaningless" to "meaningful." Still, a person who is genuinely attracted to ice cream has *something* that is lacking in a purely aversion-driven life. Someone who transitions from a deep depression in which absolutely nothing attracts him to a state in which he once again can appreciate the goodness of ice cream experiences a small gain in subjective meaning: his life is a bit brighter than it was before. Small attractions, we might say, can form the building blocks of meaning. Moreover, they can burgeon into larger attractions—e.g., becoming a connoisseur of ice cream or setting up an ice cream shop—that bring more substantial gains in meaning.[19]

But there is a more serious objection to the proposal that only attraction-motivated activity can contribute to meaning, related to the point about objectivity just discussed. When we think of lives that must feel meaningful to the people living them, we often think of people who are fighting against some real evil in the world. Activism—aimed at, say, eliminating poverty or animal abuse—seems to be a paradigmatic sort of meaning-generating activity. Unlike the person who is averse to failure and insignificance, the activist seeks to eliminate an objective bad. He thus has a reason to go on and even to be glad that he exists, since his existence may help eliminate the evil. But if paradigmatic activism is aimed at eliminating a bad in the world, and paradigmatic activism is aversion driven, this suggests that we can get meaning from aversion-driven projects after all.

18 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this objection.

19 If one is unconvinced by this example, one could interpret the main thesis of the paper as the claim that attraction-driven activity is necessary though insufficient for subjective meaning.

The first thing to note is that paradigmatic activism is not motivated solely by aversion. Granted, activists are normally strongly averse to the bad they are trying to eliminate. But real activists—even if their activism is fundamentally aimed at eliminating a bad—are normally at least partly motivated by attraction. They are attracted to things like making a difference, the rewarding social relationships that activism affords, and the positive goods that eliminating the bad will enable. Antisegregationists, for instance, were motivated at least in part by a positive attraction to a world without racism; Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech expresses this attractive vision. One way to see this is to note that the desire that motivates the paradigmatic activist would not be satisfied if the world were simply to painlessly end. That would secure the end of all injustice (and other bad things), but it would not secure the positive good she is really after.

So, paradigmatic activists *do* see their efforts as bringing about attractive ends, even if their primary focus is eliminating a bad. And these perceptions are appropriate: making a difference is positively good and hence a worthy object of attraction, even if the mere absence of suffering and injustice is not.

My account does, however, entail that someone whose activism is *purely* aversion driven does not acquire subjective meaning from it. And one might continue to insist that this is implausible, insofar as objective evils are on the scene. But, I argue, once we properly imagine the perspective of a purely aversion-driven activist, we have no trouble seeing the sense—or at least *a* sense—in which his activity must feel "meaningless" to him.

The perspective of a purely aversion-driven activist is hard to imaginatively occupy. We must imagine him as a grim character. He is not attracted to making a difference, to communion with fellow activists, or to the better world of peace and justice that will be realized if his activism is successful. This sort of activist is rare, if he exists at all. But we can imagine what his life would be like if he existed. The activist may believe his activism is worthwhile; he may even believe intellectually that his life is "meaningful" in virtue of the difference he is making. But he sees no positive value in his efforts; he is not moved by love of good, only hatred of evil. And this is, in an obvious sense, grim. We would have no trouble understanding him if he complained, "I know I'm making a difference, but my activism does not feel meaningful; to me it feels like a grim chore."

So, when we properly imagine the activist as only aversion driven, the sense that his life must feel meaningful begins to evaporate. Yet as noted earlier, the purely aversion-driven activist is unlike the person motivated by fear of failure and indictment in one respect: the activist has a desire that gives him a reason to go on, deriving from the necessity (or causal relevance) of his existence to the elimination of the bad. And we might wonder about the significance of this factor. Could it suffice to make the pursuit feel meaningful?

I say no. Though the activist's desire is categorical in this sense, his pursuit prompts a questioning akin to that mentioned earlier, this time not about his own life but rather about the world as a whole: "And once all of the suffering and injustice in the world have been removed, we will be left with … what?" The best-case scenario is that he succeeds and preserves a *world* that he takes to be at the neutral point, about which nothing positively good can be said. And this gives the sense in which his activity remains "pointless." Of course, it is not literally pointless: its purpose is to make the world better. But it is pointless in the sense that even if he succeeds, he will have brought about nothing *good*, nothing that should make him glad that the world exists at all. He sees the universe and all the activity within it as ultimately superfluous. What we seek in this questioning is something that redeems the universe's existence to some extent, something that should make us glad that it (with us in it) exists at all.

When we pursue what we see as impersonally good, such as a world of peace and justice, we *do* see ourselves as creating or sustaining value that redeems the universe's existence. Peace, justice, art, beauty, and pleasure all constitute pockets of redeeming value in the universe; their existence is "something to be said" for the universe, unlike the existence of pockets of empty space that contain no suffering.[20] An activist partly motivated by attraction thus has an answer to the question: "And once all of the evil is gone, we will be left with … what?" She can say: "We will be left with a more just world, a more beautiful world." And having an answer to this question is, I contend, irreducibly connected to our experience of a pursuit as meaningful and fulfilling, though there may be nothing more we can say as to why this is the case.

In other words, the deep reason why only attraction-motivated activity contributes to felt meaning is that meaning requires seeing ourselves as bringing about pockets of redeeming value in our own lives or in the universe—value that renders the universe and the activity within it nonsuperfluous—and only attraction-motivated activity affords this.

Another question may be raised at this point. I have claimed that only attraction-motivated activity creates the experience of meaning; the implied contrast is with aversion-motivated activity. Yet we might wonder about a slightly different case: someone who has no attractions but believes and even knows intellectually that her activities are positively good. She is thus unlike the activist who sees himself only as removing evils. She has a positive good in view—say, a world of peace and justice—and so does not take herself as trapped in a grueling cycle of only removing what she sees as bad. Her activity has the correct

20 Of course, one could be attracted to such pockets of empty space, in which case one does see them as having redeeming value.

teleological structure; but the aim is merely *believed* good, rather than seen as good. Is this pursuit subjectively meaningful? If so, this suggests that it is not attraction that is necessary for meaning but merely the belief that one's aim is positively good.

But while evaluative beliefs of this sort may provide an intellectual sense that one's life is "meaningful," they are not enough to make one's activity feel meaningful in the sense I am trying to capture. Someone who believes at an intellectual level that her activity is positively good may still *feel* empty.[21] There is thus a subjective good that goes missing when the only connection to the positive good for which one acts is intellectual: one is "numb" to the value that one believes (and perhaps even knows) to exist. Just as one can believe that a painting is beautiful without seeing it as beautiful, one can believe that a state of affairs is positively good without seeing it as such—and be detached from its goodness in this sense.

When we yearn for meaning in our lives, what we want is for the appeal of something to impact us or strike us—for it to enter our experience. Attraction, as I understand it, is the state that secures this felt connection between our activity and the positive good for which we act; when we are attracted to something we *see* it as good. Attraction is thus often necessary to sustain our confidence in the positive value of what we do. When we see a prospect as good, we normally take it to be good if the question arises, just as when we see a surface as red, we normally take it to be red if the question arises. A person who has only evaluative beliefs lacks this perceptual source of confidence; there may even be a sense in which she cannot fully or completely believe in the goodness of what she does. Someone who manages to be confident that her activity is good despite having no experience of the good may have a pale version of the good that comes with genuine attraction, but it will not be as good as someone who is acquainted with the value she is pursuing.

I have argued that attractions play a central role in the experience of meaning, which is distinct from pleasure or desire satisfaction. Before moving on to a more detailed account of attraction and aversion, a few clarificatory remarks are warranted. First, I do not claim that someone who lacks attraction lives a meaningless life in every sense. My concern here is only with subjective meaning: what makes our lives feel meaningful *to us*. Some philosophers hold that meaning in life is fully subjective.[22] Some hold that meaning in life has subjective and objective components, and one might conceivably hold that meaning

21 I am in agreement here with Kauppinen who claims that subjective meaning "isn't fundamentally a matter of judgment." Kauppinen, "Meaning and Happiness," 165.

22 For subjectivist accounts, see Taylor, *Good and Evil*; Calhoun, *Doing Valuable Time*, ch. 2; and Parmer, "Meaning in Life and Becoming More Fulfilled."

can be fully objective.[23] In any case, I aim only to characterize the subjective component; I can remain neutral on whether the subjective component is the whole of meaning or whether it is a component of a hybrid good. It is even consistent with my view to think that people can live objectively meaningful lives despite lacking all attraction if subjective and objective meaning are logically unrelated.

I can even remain neutral on whether living a subjectively meaningful life is always or necessarily good. Someone who finds herself attracted to an end that is in fact worthless (or even positively bad) may experience attraction-motivated activity and so find her life meaningful. Is it positively good for her that she finds it so? Perhaps; just as welcome pleasure is always good for the subject even if it is pleasure in the bad, attraction-motivated activity may always provide a sense of meaningfulness that contributes to the subject's welfare. But I need not insist on that. Even if we say that subjective meaning promotes welfare only when the object is worthy of attraction, it remains the case that attraction is an essential ingredient in a component of well-being.

Finally, my view suggests that attraction-driven activity is not just a component of well-being but a central component. Anyone who thinks that subjective meaning is part of the good life presumably thinks it is a critical component. Attractions play a role in well-being comparable to the role played by pleasure according to hedonistic theories and to the role played by objective goods like knowledge and friendship according to objective list theories. A complete absence of attractions and the opportunity to pursue them can leave us in that state of deep, existential boredom referenced earlier. We may feel as if we are suffocating—that our will cannot get a grip on anything in the right way. No amount of idle amusement or getting wrapped up in satisfying aversions can cure this malaise.

A picture of human psychology that speaks only of desire or preference may be adequate for the empirical explanation of action, but it is not adequate for the philosophy of well-being. Because of the importance of attraction to the philosophy of well-being, contemporary theories of desire should attend to the distinction. We therefore seek an account of attraction and aversion. I will argue—mostly via a process of elimination—that attraction and aversion are distinguished by their normative content.

23 For accounts that are at least partly objective, see Evers and van Smeden, "Meaning in Life"; Kauppinen, "Meaningfulness and Time"; Kekes, "The Meaning of Life"; Levy, "Downshifting and Meaning in Life"; Metz, *Meaning in Life*, ch. 12; Smuts, "The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life"; Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*; and Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters.*

3. Toward a Theory of Attraction and Aversion

It is worth dismissing straightaway a tempting but ultimately untenable proposal for distinguishing attraction and aversion. One might think that an attraction is simply a desire for a positive state of affairs—that *p* be the case—whereas an aversion is a desire for a negative state of affairs: that *q* not be the case. Indeed, when we talk of aversions we often talk of wanting things not to happen: not to be rejected, not to be covered in spiders, not to be poor, etc. And when we speak of attractions we speak of wanting things to happen: to be rich, happy, and famous. The problem with this simple proposal is that every desire for *p* to be the case is equivalent to a desire for not-*p* not to be the case. As Schroeder has observed, someone who desires pie can just as well be described as desiring that it not be the case that she lacks pie.[24] Someone who wants to be rich is someone who wants to not *not* be rich.

In other words, attraction and aversion cannot be distinguished by the fact that one has a "positive," the other a "negative," content; for any content *p*, positive or negative, there is a difference between being attracted to *p* and averse to not-*p*. Indeed, to say that attraction and aversion are distinct attitudes is just to say that for any content *p*, positive or negative, there is a difference between being attracted to *p* and averse to not-*p*, even if the underlying states have exactly the same conditions of satisfaction. The same problem befalls dispositional accounts of attraction and aversion: to be *disposed to bring about* that one has pie is no different than being *disposed to avoid* a lack of pie.

Another account might point to the distinctive emotional syndromes with which attraction and aversion are associated, as Sinhababu has.[25] Attractions give us a delighted happy feeling when we find that we can satisfy them and an unpleasant feeling of disappointment when we discover that we cannot. Aversions give us the pleasure of relief when we find that we can satisfy them and an unpleasant feeling of anxiety or dread when we discover that we cannot. Sinhababu's proposal echoes Descartes's observation that the desire someone has when he tends towards some good "is accompanied with love and afterwards with hope and joy," whereas "the same desire, when he tends to the avoiding an evil contrary to this good, is attended with hatred, fear, and sorrow."[26] (Descartes noted that it may nevertheless be "but one passion" that underlies these different syndromes.)

24 Schroeder, *Three Faces of Desire*, 26.

25 Sinhababu, "The Humean Theory of Motivation Reformulated and Defended," 490.

26 Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, PA a.87.

A useful heuristic for discerning whether a desire is an attraction or an aversion is to consider whether its satisfaction would bring delight or relief. But while it is true that attraction and aversion have distinct emotional profiles, it is implausible that these downstream consequences are the essential difference between attraction and aversion. Something about the nature of attraction as such should explain *why* we feel a delighted happy feeling when the attraction is satisfied. Something about the nature of aversion should explain why we are relieved (but not delighted) when the aversion is satisfied.

One traditional view, going back at least to Hume, holds that attraction and aversion are distinguished by their connections to pleasure and pain: "When we anticipate pain or pleasure from some source, we feel aversion or propensity to that object."[27] But while it is true that attractions often involve the anticipation of pleasure, this is not always the case. One can be attracted to the prospect of tasting a durian fruit or submerging oneself in an ice bath, despite expecting these things to be *wholly* unpleasant.[28] And one can be attracted to a state of affairs that has nothing to do with one's own pleasure or pain at all—e.g., the preservation of an endangered species in a remote time or place.

There is a principled reason to think that attraction does not necessarily involve the anticipation of pleasure: we can become attracted to anything we view as alluring or appealing, yet there is no essential connection between something being alluring or appealing and its being pleasant. There are many ways something can be alluring that are unconnected to its hedonic value—it may be daring, charming, sublime, virtuous, courageous, interesting, transgressive, and so on. The ice bath, for instance, may be attractive because it is purifying, not because it is pleasant. When explaining why we are attracted to something, we often refer to these qualities rather than its pleasantness.

What is more, it is not clear that pleasure can be characterized without invoking attraction. According to a leading view of the nature of pleasure, the attitudinal view, a sensation qualifies as a sensation of pleasure just in case its subject is attracted to feeling it as she is having it. But we cannot analyze attraction in terms of pleasure if pleasure is analyzed in terms of attraction.

Still, attraction may be essentially connected to pleasure in a different way than Hume specified. Pallies has not developed an account of attraction and aversion in detail but suggests that "attraction involves a certain sort of directed

27 Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.3.3.3.

28 The durian fruit example is drawn from Shaw, "Do Affective Desires Provide Reasons for Action?" 3.

anticipatory pleasure; aversion involves a certain sort of directed anticipatory displeasure."[29]

The problem with Pallies's view is that it is questionable that only attraction is associated with anticipatory pleasure. As Sinhababu has noted, all desires, including aversions, have a hedonic aspect.[30] Aversion satisfaction is associated with the pleasure of relief. And the anticipation of aversion satisfaction is also associated with pleasure: a kind of anticipatory relief. Expecting that I will make my flight, I experience a wave of pleasurable relief, directed at the prospect of being on time.

Of course, attractions may be associated with a distinctive *kind* of anticipatory pleasure: positive delight, in contrast to relief. But this is not a difference in pleasure, only in emotional character. And how do we analyze these two emotional characters? It is natural to think that delight-pleasure is the pleasure that comes with the satisfaction of an attraction, whereas relief-pleasure is the pleasure that comes with the satisfaction of an aversion, in which case attraction and aversion are more fundamental than the two kinds of pleasure. The pleasure-pain analysis, therefore, looks to be unpromising.

What is left? If the difference between being "pulled toward" *p* and "pushed away" from not-*p* cannot be characterized by appeal to dispositions, emotional syndromes, or pleasure and pain, where might it lie?[31]

Let us return to Descartes's assumption that attraction is a passion that tends to the seeking after good, and aversion is a passion that tends to the avoiding of evil. As noted, one way to spell out this idea is to say that attraction and aversion have positive and negative normative content, respectively. When we are attracted to something we see it as good, and when we are averse to something we see it as bad. According to Descartes (following Augustine), this

29 Pallies, "Attraction, Aversion, and Asymmetrical Desires," 618.

30 Sinhababu, "The Humean Theory of Motivation Reformulated and Defended," 490.

31 One theory I have not considered is Schroeder's neuropsychological theory of attraction and aversion. According to Schroeder, attraction and aversion are rooted in the reward system and the punishment system, respectively. If someone desires *p*, she "constitute(s) *P* as a reward" (*Three Faces of Desire*, 131). In contrast, aversions involve constituting not-*p* as punishing. Schroeder's theory is unusual because it *analyzes* attraction and aversion in terms of their neural bases; to be attracted to *p* just is to constitute *p* as rewarding. According to Schroeder, reward signal is a plausible candidate for what folk psychology calls "desire" in the same way the element with atomic number 79 is what folk chemistry calls "gold." Schroeder's theory deserves more discussion than I have the space for here, but I will say a few words. I am happy to grant that Schroeder is correct about the neural bases of attraction and aversion in creatures like us. However, this entails that creatures incapable of learning cannot have attractions or aversions since reward and punishment signal, on Schroeder's view, is tied to learning, but this is too difficult to accept.

is a distinction without a difference, since the privation of goodness is itself an evil; hence anyone who sees *p* as good sees (or should see) not-*p* as bad. But perhaps Descartes's argument is too quick.

Intuitively, there is a difference between the privation of goodness and the presence of evil. It would be positively good for me if I won a million dollars tomorrow; but my failing to win a million dollars is not positively bad—it is just neutral. Similarly, it would be positively bad if I had a toothache right now; but the fact that I do not have a toothache is not positively good—it is just neutral. Folk axiology finds this self-evident, and a theory of goodness can be provided that accommodates these distinctions. Such a theory sees good and bad as existing on a spectrum containing a zero point, rather like the spectrum that runs from intense pleasure to intense pain (of a given sort), which has a natural zero in states that are neither pleasurable nor painful. The neutral state of affairs would be one that is neither good nor bad—e.g., the state of affairs in which absolutely nothing exists or will exist.

So, the proposal is that when we are attracted to something we see it as *noncomparatively good*—i.e., as better than neutral. And when we are averse to something we see it as *noncomparatively bad*—i.e., as worse than neutral. The theory thus distinguishes an attraction to *p* from an aversion to not-*p* by appealing to an axiological distinction between the property of being good and the property of not being bad (or being better than the alternatives). When one is averse to not-*p*, one sees not-*p* as bad, and hence sees *p* as not bad (or better than not-*p*); but one does not see *p* as positively good (unless one is also, independently, attracted to *p*).

This is a qualified version of the "guise of the good" view of desire, though it differs in an important respect from the standard formulation.[32] The guise of the good theory says that all that is desired is seen by the subject as good in some respect or another, and intentional action, or acting for a reason, is action that is seen as good by the agent. But unlike most proponents of this view, I do not say that *desire* as such represents its object as good. My theory says that an attraction to *p* represents *p* as good. An aversion to not-*p*, in contrast, represents not-*p* as bad without representing *p* as good (leaving it open that some desires do neither, as with Radio Man's blank urge to turn on radios).[33] Thus, not all that is desired is seen as good, and not all intentional action is action

32 Defenders of the guise of the good include Anscombe, *Intention*; Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?"; Quinn, "Putting Rationality in Its Place"; Stampe, "The Authority of Desire"; Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*; Oddie, *Value, Reality, and Desire*; Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good*; and Gregory, "Why Do Desires Rationalize Actions?"

33 Quinn, "Putting Rationality in Its Place."

for the sake of something seen as good. Intentional action can be the product of aversion, in which case one sees the alternatives as bad without seeing the intended action as good.

Of course, one might deny that there is in fact an axiological zero, holding that the only axiological structure is a betterness ordering and that the appearance of a good/bad distinction can be explained away. On this view, the spectrum of value is akin to the spectrum that runs from high notes to low notes, extending infinitely in each direction, which has no zero.[34]

But in the absence of a strong argument to the contrary, it is more natural to think that the spectrum of value admits a zero point. As just noted, some things seem to contain no positive or negative value at all, such as pockets of empty space. We can formulate a further argument in support of this view. Consider that more determinate forms of goodness, like beauty, clearly exist on such a spectrum. There is a spectrum of aesthetic value consisting of the beautiful things toward one end and the ugly things toward the other, with things that are neither beautiful nor ugly in the middle. Plausibly, whenever something is generically good, its goodness is grounded in its being good in some determinate way(s)—such as its being beautiful, just, charming, or pleasant. But if these determinate forms of value exist on a spectrum with a natural zero, then generic value should too: the zero point is given by the zero point of the more determinate value(s).

And finally, the role of attraction in felt meaning supports the view that attraction and aversion have positive and negative normative content. Attraction-motivated activity is central to the good life. But as we saw, this is not because it is pleasant. The better theory is that attraction-motivated activity is valuable because attraction involves an appearance of the good, and such appearances (and activity motivated by them) are irreducibly valuable in virtue of being meaningful. Meaning cannot be attained by pursuing the lesser evil or by pursuing what is favored over the alternatives; it is realized only by being drawn forward by the (noncomparative) good. Thus, to explain the role of attraction in well-being, we must endorse a representational theory of attraction and aversion. And while this may not entail that such properties of absolute goodness and badness exist, it gives us a humanistic reason to take an interest in them.

I have argued that the best account of attraction and aversion differentiates the attitudes by their normative content. To be "pulled towards *p*" is to represent *p* as noncomparatively good in a motivationally efficacious way. It is not just to believe or even to know that *p* is good but to see *p* as good; its positive

34 For a defense of this view, see Broome, "Goodness Is Reducible to Betterness."

goodness is presented to us in experience in a quasi-perceptual way that cannot be reduced to our believing or even knowing that it is good.[35] The argument for this view is that alternative theories, such as the pleasure-pain theory, are untenable and that, in addition, only the representational view can explain the distinctive nonhedonic contribution of attraction to well-being.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that the role of desire in the good life cannot be fully appreciated without distinguishing between attraction and aversion. The experience of meaning in life requires the pursuit of ends to which we are attracted and cannot be attained simply by pursuing the lesser evil. I have further argued that when we are attracted to something, we see it as (noncomparatively) good, and subjective meaning consists in the experience of being drawn forward by the (perceived) good. Since meaning is central to the good life, and meaning requires attraction, philosophers should take the distinction between attraction and aversion seriously.[36]

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35 See Stampe, "The Authority of Desire"; and Johnston, "The Authority of Affect." I take the perceptual view to be consistent with an affect-based account of attraction, which claims that attraction essentially involves a disposition to experience positive affect, such as that defended by Smithies and Weiss in "Affective Experience, Desire, and Reasons for Action." The claim would then be that the relevant positive affect consists in a kind of quasi-perceptual experience with normative content.

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