1-2022

A puzzle about meaning and luck

Matthew HAMMERTON
Singapore Management University, mhammerton@smu.edu.sg

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Matthew Hammerton ⓘ

School of Social Sciences, Singapore
Management University, Singapore

Correspondence
Matthew Hammerton, School of Social
Sciences, Singapore Management
University, 90 Stamford Road, Singapore
178903, Singapore.
Email: mhammerton@smu.edu.sg

Abstract

This article raises a puzzle about luck and meaning in life.
The puzzle shows that, in certain cases involving luck,
standard intuitions about the meaningfulness of various
lives conflict with basic theoretical assumptions about the
nature of meaning. After setting out the puzzle, several op-
tions for resolving it are developed and evaluated.

KEYWORDS
achievement, final value, luck, meaning in life, personal value

Some people live highly meaningful lives, while others live lives that are not very meaningful. Most will agree that the lives of Albert Einstein, Confucius, Frida Kahlo, and Mahatma Gandhi were highly meaningful. They will also agree that a life spent endlessly rolling a rock to the top of a hill, counting blades of grass on Harvard Lawn, or sitting alone on the couch watching trashy TV, are lives with little, or no meaning.[1] A theory of meaning in life needs to accord with these intuitions or risk being radically revisionary. In this article, I raise a puzzle about luck and meaning in life. The puzzle shows that, in certain cases involving luck, standard intuitions about the meaning-fulness of various lives conflict with basic theoretical assumptions about the nature of meaning. I then examine, and critically assess, several options for resolving the puzzle.

1 | TWO CASES AND TWO PRINCIPLES

Consider the following case:

> THEOREM: Sofya spends a decade working on, and eventually proving, an obscure mathematical
> theorem. She does this both because she finds this activity interesting for its own sake and because
> she wants to make a contribution to mathematics. Beyond extending our theoretical mathematical
> knowledge, Sofya does not anticipate any other good effects coming from proving the theorem.
> Thus, she is not motivated by the possibility of such effects. However, after her death, it is discov-
> ered that the mathematical theorem she proved has important, unanticipated applications to an

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[1] Appeal to such cases is widespread in the literature on meaning in life. See, especially, Wolf (2010), Kauppinen (2012), and Metz (2013).

outstanding problem in particle physics. This problem is solved with the help of her theorem and a major scientific breakthrough is made.

Here is an intuition that most people have about this case. Sofya's life is made significantly more meaningful by the fact that her mathematical work leads to a major scientific breakthrough. To see this more clearly consider a slight variation on THEOREM where Sofya lives the same life, proving the same obscure theorem, yet no significant practical application is ever found for it. The only difference between these two lives is that, in the first, Sofya's life work contributes to a major scientific breakthrough, whereas, in the second, it does not. When comparing these two possible lives most will agree that the first life is more meaningful then the second.

Now, consider a second case:

> SHELTER: Winston has ambitions to be famous sculptor. After dropping out of art school and failing in several attempts to get his work featured, Winston sells all of his belongings, buys a truck full of supplies, and moves to a remote desert location. Over the next decade, he toils away at a massive sculpture, believing that it is a masterpiece which will establish his artistic genius. Sadly, Winston is deluded. His desert installation has no artistic merit and is ignored. Dejected and poor, he eventually abandons his artistic endeavors and moves to a nearby town, where he lives a modest life and develops an interest in local flora and fauna. Meanwhile, unknown to him, his abandoned art installation comes to have an important practical application. Endangered desert mice find its microclimate hospitable and build their burrows within it. They thrive and survive through a drought that would otherwise have made their species extinct.

Many people have the intuition in this case that Winston's life is made (at least slightly) more meaningful by the project that he put so much time and effort into having some good effect on the world. To see this more clearly, consider a sadder version of Winston's story where the desert mice never find his abandoned installation and thus his life's work makes no positive contribution to the world. Comparing these two lives that Winston might live, many will agree that SHELTER has some redeeming qualities that make it a more meaningful life than its sadder alternative.

Our intuitions in these two cases are strong enough for them to count as basic intuitions about meaning in life. This does not mean that these intuitions are unassailable. If they conflict with other intuitions we have about which lives are meaningful, or conflict with theoretical considerations that we accept, then, like any intuition, they could potentially be revised. However, given standard methodology in this literature, their status as basic intuitions does give them a presumptive status. The verdicts they suggest about which lives are meaningful ought to be accepted unless we have a sufficiently strong reason for accepting a different verdict.

The obvious feature that THEOREM and SHELTER share is that they are both cases involving luck. More specifically, they are instances of what Nagel (1979) calls 'resultant luck'. In each case, it is a matter of luck that a certain favorable consequence *results* from the actions the agent performs.[2] Although THEOREM and SHELTER have not been previously discussed in the philosophical literature, many have discussed similar cases where an agent makes a significant contribution to the world because of resultant luck and concluded that such

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[2]Some (such as Levy, 2019) have advocated a modal condition for resultant luck. For an event in the actual world to be lucky, it must fail to occur in a significant proportion of nearby possible worlds. This leaves the 'lucky' status of THEOREM (but not SHELTER) unclear because, presumably, in most nearby worlds where Sofya proves her theorem it leads to a scientific breakthrough. To address this concern we can suppose that the way Sofya's theorem is used to make the breakthrough is very unusual and difficult to anticipate, making it very unlikely that anyone would discover this application of it. Sofya just happens to be in a world where, by chance, several things fell together in the right way, at the right time, to make the breakthrough using her theorem. This supposition does not diminish our intuition that the key role Sofya's theorem plays in the scientific breakthrough adds meaning to her life.

contributions can still add meaning to our lives.[3] Thus, what I say about our intuitions in THEOREM and SHELTER is consistent with what is standardly said about these kinds of cases in the literature.

Let me now introduce two principles that are widely endorsed in the philosophical literature on meaning in life. The first principle is:

ADMIRABLE: Other things being equal, the more meaningful a life is the more admirable it is.

The term 'admirable' is used here in its standard sense where something is admirable just when it is fitting, or apt to admire it. ADMIRABLE is an intuitively plausible principle. Many have noted that admiration appears to be an appropriate response to the meaningful things that people do with their lives.[4] For example, consider paradigm cases of highly meaningful lives (Einstein, Confucius, Kahlo, Gandhi, etc.) and meaningless lives (Sisyphus, a compulsive grass counter, a lazy couch potato, etc.). We rightly greatly admire the former lives and have no admiration for the latter. Metz (2001, 2013) and Kauppinen (2012, 2015) take this idea further and argue that admirability can be used to analyse meaningfulness. In their view, what connects the various theories of meaning in life is that they are all attempting to account for what makes some lives more admirable and others less so. ADMIRABLE does not take a stand on whether this analysis is correct. It merely asserts the weaker claim that meaningfulness and admirability coincide.[5]

The second principle is derived from two commonly espoused ideas. The first is that meaning is a kind of 'final' or 'non-instrumental' value. Whatever directly contributes to meaning is valuable for its own sake and not merely for the good instrumental effects it has. The second is that meaning is a kind of 'personal' value—a value that applies to individual lives rather than the world in general. Therefore, each specific instance of meaningfulness is of special concern to the individual whose life it is instantiated in. Combining these two ideas, we get:

DESIRABLE: Meaning is something that we should want in our lives for its own sake.[6]

This principle clarifies the kind of value that meaning has and why it matters in our lives. It is widely endorsed in the meaning in life literature.[7] Indeed, it is difficult to make sense of anyone rejecting it. Imagine someone saying 'Although this accomplishment would, in and of itself, make your life more meaningful, it is not something that you should want in your life for its own sake'. This has an air of contradiction about it. Once the connection to what we should want in our lives for its own sake is severed, we are left wondering why the fact that something is meaningful should matter to us at all. Hence, without DESIRABLE the concept of 'meaning in life' seems to lose the basic role it plays in normative thought.

2 | GENERATING THE PUZZLE

ADMIRABLE and DESIRABLE, assuming that they are true, tell us something about THEOREM and SHELTER. Recall that in THEOREM and SHELTER we judge that the 'lucky results' that come from each agent's activity make

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[3]For example, see: Brogaard and Smith (2005), Himmelmann (2013), and Metz (2013, p. 68).

[4]For example, Cottingham (2003, p. 20), Wolf (2010, p. 7, 2016, p. 263) suggest this.

[5]Often their connection is stated using the meaningful/meaningless binary (i.e., 'meaningful lives are admirable, meaningless lives are not'). However, this appears to lead to ADMIRABLE. Lives are made meaningful by the meaningful things that happen in them or the meaningful structure they exhibit. If meaningful lives are admirable then this must be because the meaningful 'things' or 'structure' they contain are admirable. Furthermore, if life A is more meaningful than life B then A must contain a greater degree of meaningful 'things' or 'structure' in it than life B. But if it contains a greater degree of this, then it must also contain a greater degree of admirable things, and thus be more admirable.

[6]'Meaning' can be read as either *de dicto* or *de re* here. The use I put DESIRABLE to in this article is compatible with either reading, so I will stay neutral on the question of which reading is better.

[7]For example, see: Wolf (2010), Metz (2002, 2013), Audi (2005), Brogaard and Smith (2005), Kauppinen (2012, 2015), and Rowlands (2015).

their lives more meaningful. ADMIRABLE tells us that the fact that their activity produces these results makes each of their lives more admirable. DESIRABLE tells us that the production of these results by their activity is something that they should want in their lives for its own sake. In this section, I will argue that there are independent reasons for thinking that the opposite is true. Their activities having these results does not make their lives more admirable and is not something that they should want in their lives for its own sake.

Let's start with ADMIRABLE. In THEOREM, Sofya's life is intuitively made meaningful by the fact that her mathematical work leads to a major scientific breakthrough. Does this fact also make her life more admirable? To explore this, we should compare Sofya's life with that of a modal counterpart who lives exactly the same life as Sofya except that, in the counterpart's life, no significant practical application is ever found for the theorem she proves. Is Sofya's life more admirable than the life of her counterpart? Before answering this, we should clarify that both Sofya and her counterpart live admirable lives. In fact, because their lives are identical in almost all respects, they are admirable in the same ways. They both show the same perseverance, make the same contribution to mathematical knowledge, exhibit the same virtues, and so on. Our question is whether, beyond these things, there is any admiration Sofya deserves that her counterpart does not?

The answer appears to be 'no'. Sofya's efforts produce a major scientific breakthrough whereas the efforts of her counterpart do not. However, their efforts are exactly the same! Luck alone is what causes the different outcomes in their lives. And we do not admire people merely for being lucky. Support for this line of thought can be found in the philosophical and psychological literature on admiration. Algoe and Haidt (2009) describe admiration as an 'other-praising emotion'. But Sofya has not done anything differently from her counterpart that makes her more deserving of praise. Zagzebski (2015, p. 214) says that 'admiration essentially involves an awareness of a superior good in another person'. But there is no good in Sofya that her counterpart does not share. Finally, (Kauppinen, 2019, p. 43) says that 'admiration construes its target as (approximately) realising a worthwhile ideal of the person to a greater degree than the admirer (or the norm)'. But Sofya and her counterpart both realise worthwhile ideals of the person to the same degree. So according to these theoretical claims about admiration, Sofya is not more admirable than her counterpart.

The same reasoning also applies to SHELTER. When Winston's failed art installation unexpectedly brings some good to the world, we judge that this makes his life more meaningful. We can imagine a modal counterpart of Winston who lives exactly the same life as Winston except that an endangered species does not take refuge inside his abandoned art installation. Is Winston's life more admirable than his counterpart's life? It does not seem so. The only difference between them is that Winston is lucky in a way that his counterpart is not. But such differences cannot justify admiring one more than the other.

Let's now consider DESIRABLE. In THEOREM, Sofya's life is intuitively made meaningful by the fact that her mathematical work leads to a major scientific breakthrough. Is this something that she should want in her life for its own sake? Like the previous questions, this question is best approached by comparing Sofya to her modal counterpart who discovers the same theorem but lives in a world where it never results in an important scientific breakthrough. Does Sofya's life contain some final, personal value that her counterpart's life lacks? Or, put differently, is your work having important practical applications that are unplanned, unanticipated, and accidental something that it is good to have in your life for its own sake? It is important that we do not confuse this question with two related questions—one concerning final *impersonal* value, the other concerning *instrumental* personal value.

In the first instance, we must not confuse what we should want to happen *in the world* for its own sake with what we should want *in our lives* for its own sake. If you think that theoretical knowledge has final value then a scientific breakthrough is something we should value for its own sake. But this only gives us a reason for wanting it in our world; we do not yet have a reason for wanting it to occur in our own life. Thus when comparing Sofya and her counterpart we must not be misled by the thought that Sofya's world has some final, *impersonal* value (a scientific breakthrough) that is not present in the world of her counterpart. To avoid this potentially confounding factor, let us control for it by supposing that the scientific breakthrough that occurs in Sofya's world is also present in her

counterpart's world. The difference is that in Sofya's world the breakthrough comes from an application of her mathematical work, whereas in her counterpart's world the breakthrough comes independently of her work.[8] Thus, both worlds have the same impersonal, final value.

In the second instance, we must not confuse wanting something in our lives for its *own sake* with wanting it in our lives for its *good instrumental effects*. If your work unexpectedly leads to a major scientific breakthrough then various instrumental goods might follow. You might be delighted by the surprising news, find new doors opened to you, become more respected, and so on. In this sense, it is *good for you*, but this does not show that it is *good for its own sake*. We can control for this potential confounding variable by stipulating that, since during Sofya's lifetime no one realises that her work will have this important practical application, she gains no instrumental goods from it.[9]

With these two things clarified, we can go back to our question. Sofya and her counterpart live identical lives. The same impersonal goods occur in each of their worlds and they share all the same instrumental goods. However, in Sofya's world, in a way that she never planned and could not anticipate, her work leads to a major scientific breakthrough after her death. By contrast, in her counterpart's world, although the same breakthrough occurs, it happens independently of her work. Does this difference give Sofya's life more final, personal value? In other words, is the extra thing that Sofya's life has something that she should want in her life for its own sake? The answer seems to be 'no'. 'Getting lucky' in this kind of way is not something that we should want in our lives *for its own sake*. Separate from any good instrumental effects it has in our lives, or impersonal good it brings to our world, it is not something that has value. To think otherwise is to adopt a narcissistic theory of personal value that makes getting your name attached to certain 'glories', even when there is no genuine achievement on your part, good for its own sake.

It is important to clarify at this point that the scientific breakthrough is *not* something that Sofya 'achieves'. She may play a causal role in the breakthrough's occurrence, but her contribution falls short of what is needed for achievement. According to its standard philosophical analysis, achievement is necessarily purposeful. This means that your role in bringing about a valuable outcome must be intended, planned, and non-accidental if it is to count as an achievement.[10] But Sofya's contribution to the scientific breakthrough is unintended, unplanned, and accidental. Thus, we cannot use the plausible claim that achievements are good to have in your life for their own sake as grounds for attributing personal, final value to Sofya's life.

The arguments just offered about the lack of final, personal value in THEOREM equally apply to SHELTER. When Winston's failed art installation contributes to the preservation of an endangered species, this is unplanned, unintended, and accidental. As such, it is not a genuine achievement and is not an appropriate thing for him to want for its own sake in his life.

At this point, in case there are lingering doubts, it is worth elaborating on why final, personal value is lacking in these kinds of cases. The key consideration is that the good outcome the agent causes is unplanned, unintended, and accidental. As such, it is unconnected to their agency—i.e., to the decisions the agent makes and the intentions they form and act on. Various confounding variables in THEOREM and SHELTER can muddy our intuitions, so it is useful to consider a more straightforward example with the same basic structure. Suppose that, in an attempt to attract more foot traffic, a large shopping complex randomly selects a route that a patron could take through the complex and announces that if any one patron takes this route during the next month then, as a one-off, a million dollars will be donated to the Against Malaria Foundation. The complex's sophisticated surveillance system, which

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[8]We might suppose that, although the theorem that the counterpart discovers could be used to make the breakthrough, there is a separate, non-mathematical, method that can also produce the breakthrough. The breakthrough is made using this non-mathematical method and no one in the counterpart's world ever notices that the theorem provides an alternative method.

[9]If you think that the posthumous satisfaction of desires (e.g., the desire that you are remembered) is a possible good, then just assume that Sofya has no such desires.

[10]See Keller (2009), Bradford (2015), and Bradford and Keller (2015).

tracks the route taken by each patron, is then programmed to immediately alert management the first time a patron takes the selected route. A few weeks later, as you leave the shopping complex you hear an announcement that someone has just taken the random route, causing the donation to be made. A map of the route then flashes on the screen and it looks very similar to the route that you just took as you walked through the complex. It dawns on you that maybe it was you who caused the donation to be made. Then again, maybe it was someone else who walked the relevant route and your route merely looks similar. The route soon disappears from the screen and you realise that you will never know.

Now, compare the world where it is indeed you who causes the donation to be made with the 'near-miss' world where it was someone else. In neither world do you know whether you were the cause. Therefore, whether you are the cause or not makes no difference to how your life progresses in each of these worlds. Should you nevertheless hope that you happen to be in the first world and not the 'near-miss' world? In other words, is it fitting for anyone who finds themselves in this position to form a desire that they are in a world where they were the person who walked the route first? Is there more final, personal value in being in that world? It does not seem so. Wanting, for its own sake, to play a causal role in the production of a good effect, even when it is random, and does not involve your agency, planning, and intentions seems misguided. A person with this desire seems preoccupied with the wrong thing, when they should instead focus on the genuine achievements that they might make.

To summarise what has been argued for in this section, there is a certain kind of 'lucky' meaning present in THEOREM and SHELTER which, because of the way in which it is lucky, seems neither to make a life that contains it more admirable, nor to be something that we should want in our lives for its own sake. But this result conflicts with two widely endorsed principles about meaning in life—ADMIRABLE and DESIRABLE. Hence, we have a puzzle; several claims that each, independently, appear plausible, cannot all be true at the same time.

3 | RESOLVING THE PUZZLE

With a puzzle such as this, the way forward is to make a case for rejecting one of the jointly incompatible claims that generate the puzzle. There are three options available:

1. Deny that the events that occur in THEOREM and SHELTER add meaning to the lives in these cases.
2. Reject the principles ADMIRABLE and DESIRABLE.
3. Accept that the meaning-contributing features of THEOREM and SHELTER make the lives they occur in more admirable and are worth having in your life for their own sake.

A successful argument for any one of these options resolves the puzzle. In this section, I will explore how different theories of meaning in life might appeal to one or more of these options in order to resolve the puzzle.

I will begin by noting that those who endorse subjectivist or hybrid theories of meaning in life might think that they have a ready solution to the puzzle. These theories share the idea that possessing certain kinds of pro-attitudes is necessary for your life to be meaningful (subjectivists think that it is also sufficient whereas hybrid theorists disagree).[11] This appears to give them grounds for rejecting the claim that the events in THEOREM and SHELTER make the lives therein more meaningful. In both these cases, the agent is lacking the relevant kinds of pro-attitudes. For example, Sofya does not endorse, or take pleasure in the scientific breakthrough that her work leads to because it happens after her death. Yet, according to subjectivists and hybrid theorists, she needs such pro-attitudes for this event to add meaning to her life. As has been noted in the

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[11]See Wolf (2010) and Metz (2013) for further discussion. Note that different subjectivists and hybrid theorists offer different accounts of which pro-attitudes are the *relevant* ones.

literature, in taking this stance, subjectivists and hybrid theorists are offering revisionist theories that reject some common intuitions about which lives are meaningful.[12] That said, they typically argue that they have good theoretical reasons for doing so, and, insofar as they do, it seems that they can defend this solution (a version of option 1) to the puzzle.

However, this response to the puzzle does not work because THEOREM and SHELTER can be modified to introduce the relevant pro-attitudes without undermining their puzzle-generating features. For example, we could revise THEOREM so that the scientific breakthrough happens towards the end of Sofya's lifetime, stipulating that when she learns of it she responds with joy and satisfaction. This does not affect the fact that her contribution to the breakthrough is unintended, unplanned, and accidental. Yet it gives her the relevant pro-attitudes. A similar adjustment can also be made in SHELTER. Thus, in these modified cases, subjectivists and hybrid theorists no longer have a special reason to deny that the events that occur make the lives more meaningful.

Nonetheless, subjectivists (but not hybrid theorists) do have resources available to them that they might use to resolve the puzzle. First, note that one of the main motivations for subjectivism is a general skepticism towards objective value. Yet when ADMIRABLE appeals to 'what it is fitting or apt to admire' it seems to pre-suppose such value. Thus, subjectivists can reject ADMIRABLE on the grounds that there are no facts about what it is (objectively) fitting or apt to admire. There are merely subjective facts about what different people end up admiring. Second, subjectivists will accept DESIRABLE only because they think that there are certain *pro-attitudes* that you should want in your life for their own sake. But this interpretation of DESIRABLE allows them to avoid the puzzle because the modified versions of THEOREM and SHELTER include the relevant pro-attitudes, making them compatible with this interpretation of DESIRABLE.[13] The upshot is that there is no puzzle here for subjectivists.

By contrast, the puzzle remains for objectivists and hybrid theorists—who both accept that meaning requires objective value. They have reasons for accepting our intuitions in THEOREM and SHELTER (at least when they are modified in the case of hybrid theory). Furthermore, their theories are compatible with ADMIRABLE, DESIRABLE, and with the arguments offered above about what is admirable and what has final, personal value. Thus, they must confront the intellectual task of resolving this puzzle.

As we have seen above, there are three main options for resolving the puzzle. Let's start by looking at the viability of option 2—resolving the puzzle by denying ADMIRABLE and DESIRABLE. Regarding ADMIRABLE, a reasonable case might be made for rejecting it. At face value, meaning and admirability appear to coincide. However, one might argue that reflection on cases like THEOREM and SHELTER shows us that meaning and admirability come apart in certain circumstances. This may not convince a steadfast proponent of ADMIRABLE, who might argue that the reasons in favour of it outweigh the strength of the intuitions that clash with it. However, it will probably convince others to reject ADMIRABLE.[14] By contrast, DESIRABLE is much more resistant to revision. As we saw above, DESIRABLE is a bedrock idea in the meaning in life literature. Without it, it is difficult to make sense of the normative significance of meaning and the role it plays in our lives. Therefore, although a case might be made for rejecting ADMIRABLE, there appears to be no good grounds for rejecting DESIRABLE. Thus, option 2 appears untenable.

Next, we can consider the viability of option 3—resolving the puzzle by accepting that the meaning-contributing features of THEOREM and SHELTER make the lives they occur in more admirable and are worth having in your

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[12]For example, see Metz (2013), chapter 9 and 10.

[13]For example, a subjectivist might say that Sofya's passion for her scientific contribution (which she has in the modified version of THEOREM) makes her life more meaningful. The subjectivist might also say that being passionate about the things you do in your life is something that you should want in your life for its own sake. But these two things are perfectly compatible with each other and thus there is no way to generate a puzzle from them.

[14]Indeed, other cases where they potentially come apart are considered in Metz (2013, p. 33) and Martela (2017, p. 237). If one finds these purported counterexamples persuasive, then the case against ADMIRABLE will be strengthened.

life for their own sake. To make a case for this option, one would need to successfully undermine the arguments I gave against these claims above. I would not have presented these arguments as I did if I thought that there were good responses available that can undermine them. But this does not preclude someone from mounting a case in defence of the relevant claims. If they succeeded then option 3 would be successful. I will not comment further on the prospects of success here except to note that there is a challenge for anyone who attacks my arguments by rejecting the claims I make about what admiration is and what achievement is. These claims were derived from the relevant literatures on admiration and achievement, which have developed independently of the literature on meaning in life. Therefore, a plausible attack on these claims needs to be independently motivated. It is ad hoc to claim that these literatures are fundamentally misguided just in order to preserve certain ideas about meaning in life.

Finally, let us consider the viability of option 1—resolving the puzzle by denying that the events in THEOREM and SHELTER add meaning to the agents' lives. At first glance, this appears to be the most straightforward way to resolve the puzzle. Even the most hard-core intuitionist should accept that, at least occasionally, our intuitive assessment of a case turns out to be wrong. Thus, if you are committed to ADMIRABLE and DESIRABLE, and convinced by the argument in the previous section, then it is not such a radical move to conclude that our intuitions in THEOREM and SHELTER are misguided.

However, on further consideration things not so straightforward. Anyone who takes this approach needs to explain why the events in THEOREM and SHELTER are not meaningful even though they involve an agent putting significant effort into activities that bring excellent outcomes into the world (something that is present in paradigm cases of meaningful activity). The obvious answer is that the good outcomes in THEOREM and SHELTER come from resultant luck and this is what makes them different from other cases. However, real life instances of potentially meaningful acts are not neatly divided into those that bring about good outcomes solely due to resultant luck and those that do so with little or no resultant luck. There is rather a continuum of cases with varying degrees of resultant luck involved. As Williams (1981, p. 29) puts it: 'One's history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not'. If the activities in THEOREM and SHELTER are not meaningful because of the resultant luck involved, then what about cases that are similar except that they contain a little less resultant luck? Would our intuitions about meaning in these cases also be undermined because of the resultant luck present? If so, then there is a threat that, by denying meaning in THEOREM and SHELTER, we are embracing a radically revisionary theory that denies meaning in many more cases where it is intuitively plausible.

For a taste of what some of these troublesome 'intermediate' cases might look like, imagine someone engaged in a project aimed at a particular end who thinks 'wouldn't it be nice if my work on this project also contributed to this valuable unrelated end'. Suppose that this person then makes a small adjustment to the way they are pursuing their project because it slightly increases the very low chance of their work bringing about the further valuable end. Then, mainly due to extremely good luck, but also helped by the small adjustment they made, their project does actually bring about the further valuable end. This case is different from THEOREM and SHELTER because the agent intends (in some sense) and plans (in some minimal way) that her project brings about the valuable end. Nonetheless, resultant luck plays the dominant role in this example, and the agent's contribution is minimal.

If we decide that our intuitions in THEOREM and SHELTER are unreliable, then what should we make of intuitions in this intermediate case telling us that the agent's 'lucky' contribution to the further valuable end makes her life more meaningful? Whatever we say, we will face the problem of giving a plausible explanation for why, in some cases, resultant luck undermines meaning and, in other cases, it does not. Thus, if option (1) is taken then significant theoretical work needs to be done. We need an account of how resultant luck interacts with meaning. This account must not take the drastic step of denying meaning in *all* cases involving any degree of resultant luck, as this would radically limit which lives are meaningful. Therefore, it must include a principled, non-arbitrary account

of when meaning is, and is not, undermined by luck.[15] Nothing in the current literature on meaning in life approaches this theoretical need. The discussions of meaning and luck in Brogaard and Smith (2005) and Himmelmann (2013) do well to observe that luck can pose some tricky questions for meaning in life and to note that this is related to the problem of moral luck. However, neither of these discussions of meaning and luck identifies or anticipates the puzzle that I raise here and neither develops a systematic account of meaning and luck that can play the theoretical role needed.

4 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I have advanced a puzzle about luck and meaning in life. Basic intuitions about meaning in life tell us that, in certain cases involving resultant luck, meaning is present. Theoretical work on meaning in life supports principles connecting meaning to admiration and to final, personal value. Yet, there are persuasive arguments showing that, in the relevant cases, admiration is inappropriate and there is no final, personal value. To resolve this puzzle, one of these things must be given up.

I then showed how, given some of their controversial starting assumptions, subjectivists about meaning in life can easily resolve this puzzle. On the other hand, hybrid theorists and objectivists about meaning in life have a much harder time. They must either: (1) develop a theory of the relationship between luck and meaning that allows them to deny meaning in the relevant cases while accepting it elsewhere, or (2) justify a radical revision of the relationship between meaning and final, personal value, or (3) counter the arguments developed above that show there is no final, personal value nor fitting admiration in the relevant cases. Each of these options requires substantial work, and each, if successfully completed, would push the literature on meaning in life into new territory. Therefore, the puzzle that I have posed in this article is a significant one.

ORCID
Matthew Hammerton https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4649-8206

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[15] A referee for this journal helpfully points out that someone who wants to deny the presence of meaning in THEOREM and SHELTER might address the problem I raise here by appealing to the commonplace idea that meaning comes in degrees. Perhaps the 'intermediate' cases that involve less luck than THEOREM can be assigned varying degrees of meaningfulness corresponding to their degree of 'luckiness'. This is a promising proposal. However, it does not explain why there should be *no* meaning in THEOREM. Indeed, it seems to fit better with the idea that there is *some* meaning in THEOREM, just slightly less of it than in the next closest intermediate case. Yet, option 1 for resolving the puzzle involves denying that there is *any* meaning in THEOREM.

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