Social Roles and Meaningful Lives

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Abstract: Many educators are also academic researchers and activists. This diversity can enrich our lives in important ways, allowing us to experience distinct domains of life and apply insights across them. Nevertheless, the responsibilities connected to these roles sometimes conflict in ways that undermine the meaningfulness of an educator's life by undermining the coherence of its narrative structure. In this discussion, I argue that conflicting responsibilities connected to these, and other roles can undermine the meaningfulness of our lives, respond to the most pressing objections to this argument, and then offer a general approach for navigating these conflicts.

I. Introduction

In the predawn hours of an August morning, I drove to a McDonald's in downtown Toronto for reasons that I was not yet permitted to know. Further instructions soon arrived via an encrypted messaging application: walk a mile to the nearby slaughterhouse, sit down on a curb, and blend into the surroundings. A series of questions followed: which bay doors are open; how many trucks and workers are there; does anyone seem agitated; is there a police presence? I provided my answers, deleted the conversation, and made my exit.

Five hours later, I found myself sprinting through the summer heat back to the slaughterhouse. When I arrived, a line of police officers stood between a throng of activists and the partially opened bay doors to the room where chickens packed in cages awaited death. Four chickens had already been rescued and four activists had used a *lock boxing* technique: arms were chained inside PVC tubing running through large plastic bins that had been filled with quick drying cement and placed under the doors. Due to the mechanics of the lock boxing technique, only the activists, by their own volition, were able to extricate themselves safely, and the weight of the bins rendered them effectively stationary.

For the next seven hours, the activists remained locked through the bins while our negotiator spoke with the police. Eventually, a resolution was reached: the chickens who already had been rescued would be transported to a sanctuary where they would be happy, safe, and free from exploitation for the rest of their lives, and all police investigations into the day's incidents would be closed without any arrests. Additional causes for celebration could be found beyond the details of the formal resolution: the topic of animal liberation was discussed widely throughout the local media and a young activist community gained valuable experience carrying out technically demanding tactical maneuvers.

We all occupy different roles during our lives, and you have just learned one of mine: activist. As an activist, my primary responsibility is to employ the most effective tools available to bring about a world where animals are no longer raised or killed for their flesh, skin, or secretions, used in invasive, harmful, non-therapeutic research, or exploited in harmful ways for entertainment. This responsibility differs significantly from my responsibilities as a researcher and an educator. As a researcher, I am obligated to follow the inquiry wherever it leads in the pursuit of the truth (or at least the best wrong answer currently available). This process has led me to endorse a number of conclusions that are, at the very least, inconvenient for me as an activist: rights have extrinsic value, but no intrinsic value; acts are wrong only insofar as performing them leads to lower overall utility than alternative acts in an agent's option set, but no classes of acts–including murder and torture–are intrinsically wrong. As an educator, I am committed to the respectful and charitable exposition of articles in which morally abhorrent views, such as the position that humans, and only humans, have rights, are defended.

To be clear, I am not pointing to the thoroughly uninteresting observation that we often follow different rules when engaging in different tasks: when building electronics, I ground my circuits properly; when running in the heat, I drink sufficient electrolytes and water; I brush my teeth at least twice every day. The interesting cases are ones where the responsibilities are connected to the roles, and we take on conflict in ways that compromise our ability to live internally consistent lives.

In what follows, I will argue that conflicting responsibilities connected to our social roles can undermine the meaningfulness of our lives. I will then respond to two objections and then offer a few suggestions for how we ought to move forward. While my conclusion applies generally across a variety of role responsibilities, I make my case by focusing on two of the roles that many educators take on in addition to their role as an educator: academic researcher and activist.

II: Conflicts Between Role Responsibilities

Role responsibilities are a proper subset of what Shelly Kagan (1992) refers to as special obligations: "special obligations involve the particular duties and responsibilities that we have by virtue of our own individual circumstances and history" (230). By stipulation, role responsibilities are special obligations that we have as a result of the social roles that we take on with agency.[1] I borrow Quill R. Kukla's (2021) conception of agency:

> *Someone has agency when they act in ways that express their own values, desires, and purposes, whether long-standing or fleeting. So, agency requires (1) positive capacities to act and (2) action that hasn't been hijacked by others' goals and desires. It does not require that someone actively or consciously chose their current action, in an independent act of will (273).*

When becoming a philosophy lecturer, one accepts a variety of role responsibilities: to present accurate information, to grade fairly, to respect students in class discussions, and so on. On my

[1] In defining 'role responsibilities' in this way, I am sidestepping a discussion of involuntary special obligations. Such a discussion, though interesting, is unnecessary for this inquiry, since research, teaching, and activism are generally entered into voluntarily.

account, a lecturer still has these obligations even if her desire to become a philosophy lecturer was fleeting or if her upbringing disposed of her to find that career path attractive. But I do not claim that she takes on these responsibilities if she lacks the cognitive capacities to understand what a philosophy lecturer is or if she has signed her employment contract in response to a threat against her life.[2]

I take no stance about whether role responsibilities have intrinsic moral significance or whether they are merely useful concepts to which we ought to refer during our practical deliberations. Let's unpack this distinction. Consider a lawyer who has just learned that one of her clients embezzled millions of dollars from an orphanage in Malawi a decade ago. If she reports her client's crimes to the relevant authorities, her client will be sentenced to prison for five years and the lives of thousands of children will be saved once the money is recovered and used to fund lifesaving medical treatments. If she remains silent, her client will remain free, and thousands of children will suffer and die.

Suppose that attorney client privilege is in effect since this is a past crime and her client is neither under investigation nor actively covering up past crimes. If, on the one hand, role responsibilities have intrinsic moral significance, then breaking attorney client privilege is morally bad because it is a violation of a role responsibility. That said, there is a difference between concluding that action is bad and concluding that it is all-things-considered wrong. If the consequences of our actions count for something in the moral calculus, it may still be right for the lawyer to reveal her client's past crimes; the act's badness, though real, could be outweighed by the goodness of saving many lives. On the other hand, if role responsibilities are merely useful concepts for practical deliberation, then there needn't be anything morally bad, *per se*, in violating attorney client privilege. Instead, we should see prescriptions for observing attorney client privilege as useful practices designed to promote that which is intrinsically valuable. For example, if attorney client privilege usually promotes justice and if justice is intrinsically valuable, then we should protect attorney client privilege because of its connection to justice.

There is no shortage of cases of conflict between role responsibilities. In this discussion, I will focus on the following three:

1. Emily is a philosophy professor and a pro-choice activist who strongly believes that expanding access to abortion is one of the most important causes for which one can fight. Based on past experiences, she believes that assigning Don Marquis's (1989) paper, *An Argument That Abortion Is Wrong*, will have two effects: it will prompt excellent discussions in her classroom; it will inspire at least 10% of her pro-choice students to become sympathetic to pro-life arguments and push half of that 10% to adopt pro-life views. Should she assign the paper?

[2] One might object to these conditions on the grounds that they are too strict. For the purposes of this discussion, I am electing to use a strict definition because it is more important to ensure that I have given a sufficient condition for having role responsibilities than to ensure that I have given a necessary condition. It is consistent with my view that some people have role responsibilities who do not meet this sufficient condition (e.g., perhaps children involuntarily take on role responsibilities with respect to their parents or drafted soldiers involuntarily take on role responsibilities regarding one another, enemy combatants, and others).

2. Darius, a philosophy professor, is preparing a lecture on utilitarianism in a business ethics course. Many lecturers misstate the difference between act and rule utilitarianism by pretending that it amounts to a difference between theories of deliberation (i.e., act utilitarians exclusively figure out what to do by calculating the utility of each action and rule utilitarians use rules to figure out what to do) rather than a difference between competing theories of what makes an action right (i.e., an act's producing greater net utility vs an act's being in accordance with a rule). Darius believes, from past experience, that he has two choices: (1) using most of the class time to correctly present the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism, leaving at least 60% of the students confused; (2) pretending that Jeremy Bentham did not write Chapter 4, section VI of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, declaring that the felicific calculus is the only way that act utilitarians deliberate, and, in the end, efficiently providing all of the students with a clear grasp of a simplified Bentham-inspired theory that is sufficient for their success in the business ethics course. Should he take option (1) or option (2)?

3. Yang is a philosophy professor who works on act utilitarianism; he is also an animal rights activist. As an act utilitarian, he does not believe that rights have any intrinsic moral significance. However, he believes that *referring to and defending* rights is a useful practice for protecting morally important interests–including the interests of non-human animals. In general, Yang is discrete about his views, publishing them in academic philosophy journals where few will ever read them. However, he has just been asked to appear on a podcast about animal rights. He knows that, generally speaking, the audience will not understand the nuances of his views; answering the questions he receives honestly will increase, in their minds, the legitimacy of the position that it is morally acceptable to raise and kill animals for food (i.e., since he will say that rights are just useful fictions rather than intrinsically valuable). Should he (1) answer the questions honestly, or (2) emphasize the importance of rights in protecting interests and lie or deflect in response to questions about the intrinsic moral value of rights?

In Scenario (1), Emily faces a conflict between her responsibilities as an educator and her responsibilities as an activist. As an educator, she ought to prioritize papers that challenge her students, help them charitably consider views that differ from their own, and prompt good dialogue in the classroom. As an activist, she ought to perform actions that result in the greatest amount of support for the pro-choice cause and the least amount of support for the pro-life cause.[3] In Scenario (2), Darius faces a conflict between his responsibilities as an educator and his responsibilities as a researcher. As a researcher, he ought to communicate accurate information about his area of expertise in public settings. As an educator, he ought to use classroom time efficiently and explain philosophical theories in such a way that they are comprehensible to his students; sometimes the best way to accomplish these teaching goals is to simplify the theories that are being taught. In

[3] Clearly, in the classroom there is a default role of educator rather than activist. One might think that this fact means that Emily does not actually face a conflict between role responsibilities. I develop this response and respond to it below in section IV.

Scenario (3), Yang faces a conflict between his responsibilities as a researcher and his responsibilities as an activist. As a researcher, he has a responsibility to honestly and clearly communicate the results of his research. As an activist, he has at the very least a responsibility not to undermine the just cause for which he is fighting by promulgating a message that will embolden his opposition.

In this discussion, I focus on cases where there is a sharp conflict that creates a crisis point: one feels the force of two or more sets of responsibilities that pull in different, mutually exclusive directions. But crucially, there is another way that the consequences of a collection of role responsibilities can undermine the meaningfulness of a life without creating an explicit conflict that leads to a crisis. This happens when an agent pursues many roles to a minimal degree without achieving success in any of them. This constant cycle of redirection precludes the cultivation of a practice of focused engagement necessary for the achievement of excellence. As the agent adopts more and more roles, it becomes increasingly implausible that any of them will form the basis of a chapter in her life. At the end of the day, her attempt to become everything prevents her from becoming a compelling example of anything.

III. An Account of Meaningfulness

Over the next two sections, I will argue that we should reconcile conflicts between our role responsibilities because such conflicts threaten the meaningfulness of our lives. I will begin by articulating an account of the meaningfulness of life and then show how these conflicts threaten this sense of meaningfulness.

Antti Kauppinen (2012) helpfully distinguishes between *concepts* and *conceptions* of meaningfulness. Concepts of meaningfulness are answers to the question, what do we mean when we say that a life is meaningful? Kauppinen invites us to begin to answer this question by considering other objects that are meaningful for us. One object that is meaningful for me is a plastic sign from my late grandfather's real estate appraisal business that hangs on the wall behind my desk. Although this sign is monetarily worthless, its meaningfulness for me consists in its being "such as to give rise to affectively charged memories and emotions. [I am] not indifferent to it but find it unique and irreplaceable" (353). In particular, reflecting on this sign inspires memories and emotions from my childhood: walks in the woods deep in conversation, holiday visits to the house where he and my grandmother lived, the smell of old books that emanated from his office, and my admiration for a life characterized by hard work, intellectual humility, unshakable kindness, and the pursuit of studying art and philosophy for their own sake.

On this account of the concept of meaningfulness, something "is meaningful in the relevant sense when certain emotions and attitudes are not out of place" (353). The attitudes and feelings I indicated above would be out of place, for example, if I were to associate them with the mass-produced acrylic clock on the wall opposite my desk, as I purchased it four years after his death, and it has no connection to him whatsoever. We can take this concept of meaningfulness and apply it to life. When we reflect on paradigmatic cases of meaningful lives–Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Vincent van Gogh, and Nadia Boulanger–our judgment that the life is meaningful consists in our judgment that "feelings of fulfilment and admiration" are appropriate (353). Meaningfulness admits

of thresholds and gradability: there can be a "contextually determined threshold" below which a life does not count as meaningful, and a life can be more or less meaningful than another one. This is to say, a life can fail to be meaningful at all if it fails to be the sort of life about which feelings of fulfillment and admiration are appropriate, and some lives can be more deserving of those feelings than others (353-354).[4]

But what makes a life the sort of life about which feelings of fulfillment and admiration are appropriate? A *conception*–as opposed to a concept–of meaningfulness is an answer to this further question. The most influential answer today comes from Susan Wolf (2007), whose position is roughly as follows: a meaningful life is one in which a person actively engages with (1) something that they love deeply, and which is (2) objectively worthy of that love (78). This position is intended to preserve the benefits, while rejecting the flaws, of two initially attractive positions that she rejects: (a) your life is meaningful just in case you're doing what you love; (b) your life is meaningful just in case you are pursuing something larger than, or independent of, yourself (79). What (a), but not (b), gets right is that there is a subjective component to a meaningful life: a life where one feels alienated from one's tasks is not a meaningful life even if those tasks are objectively valuable. This is expressed in Wolf's (1). What (b), but not (a), gets right is that a life spent in the pursuit of objectively worthless pursuits–a life spent scrolling TikTok videos or transcribing copies of a mediocre work of literature by hand–is not a meaningful life regardless of how much one enjoys those activities. This is expressed in Wolf's (2).

Kauppinen's (2012) account builds on Wolf's. He asserts that a "meaningless life is one that is not going anywhere or moving forward" and argues that an adequate conception must incorporate this fact into an account of "how meaningfulness builds over time" (357). To see why Kauppinen's assertion is plausible, I would invite you to reflect on the times in your own life, or the life of someone close to you, when you most strongly had the intuition that the life in question was *not* meaningful. These were most likely the times in which projects were not going anywhere–where there was a feeling of stagnation as day-to-day, week-to-week, or year-to-year activities failed to proceed towards any valuable end whatsoever. A conception of meaningfulness should accommodate this intuition. To put it another way, a conception of meaningfulness should tell us to "understand life in temporal, dynamic terms to best capture our intuitions about meaningfulness" (357).

[4] One question you might have is as follows: is there an objective fact that one life is more meaningful than another, or is a claim about the comparative meaningfulness of two lives just a claim that a particular agent or group of agents finds one life more meaningful than another? If you accept the first disjunct (as does Susan Wolf (2007)), then you can understand my thesis as including the claim that competing role responsibilities can make our lives objectively less meaningful. If you accept the second disjunct, then you can understand my thesis as including the claim that competing role responsibilities can generate states of affairs in which we find our lives less meaningful. As long as we accept that there is something bad–either intrinsically or extrinsically–with having objectively less meaningful lives *or* finding our lives less meaningful, I see no reason why either approach could not be turned into an account that is consistent with my conclusion, although each accepts different burdens: the first, to defend an account of the objective facts in question; the second, to deal with purported counterexamples in which it is stipulated that agents find the wrong things meaningful.

When we understand our lives in this way, we observe that they are composed of connected events that already have a narrative structure. Even before we tell stories about our lives, they include the setting of long-term goals, the pursuit of those goals, and either the success or failure of those pursuits. My writing sessions lead to papers, which, ideally, lead to journal submissions, publications, the continued development of my research program, and new career opportunities. It is also true that our various goals can be connected or unconnected from each other: the lessons I learn in the pursuit of my research are directly relevant to my mentorship of younger scholars and students, but the content of the discoveries I make in my research are often irrelevant to my journey to become the best instructor that I can be. And like many narratives, our lives are composed of various chapters: relatively stable combinations of activities and settings (359). For most readers of this paper, it will be the case that a college chapter was organized around self-exploration while the activities of the graduate school chapter aimed towards the crystallization of a mature line of inquiry.

According to Kauppinen, "a central project contributes to the meaningfulness of a chapter to the degree that a) the goal is interpersonally or objectively valuable, b) the agent adopts the goal as her own, is irreplaceable, and exercises her essential human capacities in pursuing it, and c) the agent is successful in reaching the goal and is positively changed by this" (364). For example, suppose that a political scientist wakes up one morning to find that his entire research program of 40 years is now worthless because it depended on the assumption that there will always be a bipolar great-power rivalry between the United States and Russia. Such a discovery would undermine the meaningfulness contributed by that central project.[5] Consider another example: a researcher begrudgingly teaches introductory logic classes with such mediocrity that she could easily be replaced by a first-year graduate student with no teaching experience. Even if her students benefit from the course, her lack of connection to the project of teaching and replaceability reduce the extent to which that project adds meaningfulness to her life. And finally, consider that someone's first-year struggles in graduate school will have more meaning if they eventually lead to the positive (as opposed to negatively) personally transformative completion of a PhD in philosophy than if they are expelled after failing to complete the second-year logic requirement.

In addition to evaluating the meaningfulness of each chapter in a life, we can explore the contribution made by sequences of chapters to the meaningfulness of the whole. A life, when taken as a whole, is more meaningful to the extent that its "chapters *build on* one another without being subsumed under one single goal" (368). A life where a philosopher finds employment that allows them to put into practice what they learned in graduate school (e.g., a career as an ethics consultant, philosophical counselor, academic philosopher, or ethics center administrator) has this feature, whereas one in which someone simply goes back to graduate school to complete another PhD in a different field–and then repeats this practice until they die–does not. The reason why it is important that the different chapters are not subsumed under a single goal, however, is that we lose sight of what is valuable about the projects and relationships that we pursue during the different chapters of our lives if they are only steps along a path to a major goal. Kauppinen puts the point like this: "For a life to be truly Single Purpose, everything else would have to be organized around it. Finding a partner, for example, could not be an independent goal, but would be subsumed under the Grand

[5] That supposition is based on a real-life case shared with me by a colleague in political science.

Scheme. Surely this would diminish the significance of personal relationships. The same goes for other valuable goals. They are relegated to a supporting role, at best" (367).

To summarize, a life is meaningful to the extent that feelings of fulfillment and admiration are appropriate to take towards it. This condition is met to the extent that life is a coherent procession of chapters that include the successful pursuit of valuable projects through the irreplaceable exercise of essential human capacities.[6]

IV. Conflicts that Undermine Meaningfulness

My argument, that conflicts between role responsibilities can harm us by undermining the meaningfulness of our lives, goes as follows: Emily, Darius, and Yang are in chapters of their lives in which they are exercising their essential human capacities in the pursuit of objectively valuable goals. Given the roles they have chosen, making a choice that contributes to the successful pursuit of one of their goals constitutes making a choice that harms the successful pursuit of another of their goals. Since a meaningful life includes a coherent arrangement of chapters in which one finds success in the pursuit of important goals, they are jeopardizing the meaningfulness of their lives. This case is plausible, and I will consider two arguments against it. Both of these arguments attempt to deny the seriousness of conflicts between role responsibilities by maintaining that such conflicts can be easily dismissed. If they can be dismissed, then so can my concern about conflicts that undermine the meaningfulness of a life.

The first argument goes like this: role responsibilities are domain-specific and the domains in question do not overlap. Perhaps I ought to be an educator, and only an educator, when I walk into the classroom, an activist, and only an activist, when I am planning a campaign, and a researcher, and only a researcher, when I am writing philosophy articles.[7] What this objection gets right is that

[6] Although I make my case using Kaupinnen's account, my conclusion is consistent with a number of different accounts of intrinsic value and the goodness of lives. For example, suppose that someone believes that the intrinsic value of a life is determined merely by adding or averaging the intrinsic value of all of the individual moments in a life (see Ben Bradley (2008) and Fred Feldman (2004)). Someone who accepts this position can still think that, in the real world in which we live, the successful pursuit of valuable goals within the course of a coherent series of chapters is, other things equal, a reliable path for maximizing intrinsic value. A hedonistic utilitarian could think that such a path is more likely than its alternatives, in everyday cases, to result in the development of skills to benefit others (e.g., consider the arduous task of going to medical school and dedicating one's life to researching deadly diseases) and a greater intensity and duration of experiences of many types of pleasures (e.g., consider the pleasures associated with reflecting on Bach's cello suites after learning them as a child, spending decades performing them in a variety of settings, and finally returning to them when teaching the next generation of cellists). Thus, a commitment to consequentialism–even a form of consequentialism, such as hedonistic utilitarianism, with a single type of intrinsic value–is consistent with accepting the claim that, as a matter of applied ethics, the coherence of one's life's narrative structure is (extrinsically) morally relevant. They can, thus, be deeply concerned about the moral implications of failing to protect the coherence of the chapters of our lives' narrative structures and build this concern into their practices of practical deliberation.

[7] One response to this objection, which I do not have the space to develop here, is that such a delineation is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the three activities. In particular, teaching is, according to theorists like Paulo Freire (2000) supposed to be a radical exercise in activism. I am unsympathetic to this response. However, as long as it does not amount to the implausible position that activist considerations always trump all other considerations, or that the

some responsibilities do not apply across domains. Observing precise norms for citing academic sources and making arrangements for jailed comrades are important for academic research and activism respectively (and not vice versa).

Nevertheless, this picture is incomplete. Consider Emily's perspective on June 24, 2022: she is a longtime pro-choice activist who, after watching the erosion of abortion rights over several decades, learns that the United States Supreme Court has overturned *Roe* and *Casey*, allowing states to ban abortion. As she looks out over the students in her classroom, she sees dozens of young people whose bright futures may be derailed by an unexpected pregnancy that they are unprepared to handle. Even more precarious, she thinks, are the situations of those who lack the resources to study philosophy at an elite, private college. Most of her students will most likely have the resources to access abortions across state lines; tens of millions experiencing greater financial precarity will not be so lucky.

When you *really* take on Emily's perspective, does it seem plausible that she, standing in front of her classroom with such thoughts and experiences, must regard her responsibilities to those harmed by abortion restrictions as having no weight whatsoever? When I reflect on this question, the only answer that strikes me as remotely plausible is "no." Surely, living an internally consistent life requires us to give weight, in our deliberations, to the considerations that matter to us the most. The following general advice rings hollow: there is *no* conflict between your competing role responsibilities because your deepest commitments to the most important causes hold no weight whatsoever in your deliberations about what you ought to do once you enter the classroom.

To be clear, I am certainly not asserting that Emily is morally permitted to proselytize in the classroom in order to defend her internal consistency. It may be true that pedagogical concerns usually, or almost always, *trump* activist concerns in the classroom.[8] But notice that this description–in terms of trumping or outweighing–implies that there is a winner and thus a conflict. It is an acknowledgment of a conflict between role responsibilities that does not disappear through the assertion that these activities take place in different domains of life.

One theoretical advantage of Emily's internal conflict was that it took place in a classroom, and classrooms are places where there is a presumptive default role: educator. This first version of the no conflict position was untenable in that context, but it faces even greater challenges in Yang's vignette. To what context should Yang default? A podcast interview is neither an activist context, a research context, or a teaching context, but some hybrid of all three. Speakers educate listeners about a topic, advocate for their points of view about matters of public concern and engage with other experts about their research.

A second argument for disregarding the possibility of meaningfulness-disrupting conflicts amounts to denying that it is ever appropriate to accept collections of roles that can lead to a conflict.

role of an educator simply is the role of an activist, it would make my case even stronger if it were successful (i.e., by increasing the difficulty of reconciling role responsibilities in classrooms).

[8] See Maughn Gregory (2014) for a proposal for how to facilitate classroom inquiry dialogues about such issues without advocating for a point of view about the issue itself.

If Emily, Darius, and Yang experience conflicts between their role responsibilities, it is because they have failed to choose one, and only one, role. This failure is analogous to the following failure: I promise to help run an academic conference and a friend's surprise party at the same time. In this example, I have made a mistake by explicitly entering a state of affairs in which I cannot satisfy all of my voluntary special obligations. Likewise, Emily, Darius, and Yang can be accused of inappropriately adopting three roles that they cannot hope to satisfy jointly. What this argument gets right is that it is valuable to develop expertise in one's roles and everyone operates under time and effort constraints. As I discussed above, one way that we can fail to achieve a meaningful life is by taking on so many roles that we fail to achieve excellence at any of them. Becoming a great researcher may take up too much of one's time to allow for the development of expertise in the field of activism.

On the other hand, limiting yourself in this way cuts you off from important ways of relating to important and interesting subjects, precludes the possibility of drawing connections between your practical and theoretical engagement with those subjects, and ignores the realities of academic life. I know, from my own experience, that my projects in activism, teaching, and research have enriched my life and often (though certainly not always) been mutually supportive in ways that have been necessary for my successes in all three fields. Due to my experiences as an activist, when I write or teach about infighting or the selection of approaches to social change, those activities are imbued with a greater sense of urgency and an inextricable connection to the practical upshots of these phenomena. What's more, the realities of academic life are such that nearly all researchers also teach. It would almost certainly be impossible for Darius, and indeed for most of us, to avoid the role responsibilities associated with teaching students while being employed in a research role at a university.

In other words, restricting our roles too much can undermine the meaningfulness of our lives by cutting us off from opportunities to achieve success in our projects through combining insights across pursuits. And, practically speaking, the restrictions that would resolve the situations of Emily, Darius, and Yang are implausible.

IV. Being a Conscientious Author

I have argued that conflicts between role responsibilities cannot be easily dismissed and that they can harm us by undermining the meaningfulness of our lives. In the space that I have left, I will tentatively point towards a solution: becoming conscientious authors of the stories of our lives.

Conscientiousness has at least three dimensions. The first concerns taking on the right number of roles. On the one hand, if you found an activist organization while simultaneously leading a curriculum development committee, working on three book manuscripts, and attempting to raise young children, you will be crushed under the weight of competing role responsibilities. It is important not to take on too much. On the other hand, we must be mindful of opportunities–including unexpected and surprising ones–to accept new responsibilities that can either form the basis of or enrich the central projects of chapters of our lives. Perhaps your experience training for a marathon as part of a running group or your time touring with a band can yield fruitful

philosophical thought experiments for your research that can also help you accessibly present complex concepts in your classroom. And perhaps your experience spending a summer working on a construction site can give you stories with which you can make powerful appeals in your activism. It is important not to pass on too many opportunities.

In other words, the coherence necessary for a meaningful life is achieved not through a default attitude towards avoiding or adopting new social roles, but by reflecting on whether we are taking on too many roles or avoiding important opportunities. These reflections will put us in a position to make adjustments–sometimes taking on more roles and other times declining invitations. There are two obvious connections between this approach and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that are worth noting.[9] The first is that I have described something like a virtue that exists on a spectrum between vices of excess and deficiency: we should neither be excessively open to, nor deficiently closed to, new social roles and their attendant responsibilities, aiming instead towards a disposition that exists between these extremes. The second is that, rather than an algorithmic decision procedure, I am recommending an appeal to something like *phronesis*: practical wisdom is necessary when deliberating about whether and how to add or avoid taking on a new social role.[10]

Another aspect of conscientiousness concerns the possibility that some roles contain contradictory responsibilities. The most salient examples of these involve what is called, "the problem of dirty hands," such that one must decide whether to commit a serious moral crime in order to avoid some greater harm: a politician must decide whether to torture a terrorist in order to obtain information about the location of a bomb hidden in a city; a general must decide whether to bomb a military target in a heavily populated area in order to prevent a war from continuing in a way that is expected to result in much higher civilian casualties; a union leader must decide whether to have strikebreakers beaten in order to protect the integrity of a strike that is very close to reaching a deal (Coady 2024).

It is an open question whether true moral dilemmas like the problem of dirty hands actually exist or whether they are based on a conceptual confusion. Those who consider it a conceptual confusion believe that it is not, all things considered, morally wrong to perform a harmful action that is less harmful than its alternatives (see Nielson 2000). Regardless of how we answer this theoretical question about the reality of genuine moral dilemmas, what is clear is that dirty hands situations involve conflicts among the responsibilities within a single role. For when we have the experience of a problem of dirty hands, we are aware of a responsibility to avoid crossing certain lines in the pursuit of good ends as well as a responsibility to weigh particular ends so heavily that we are willing to commit moral crimes in order to achieve them.

In some cases, a person in such a role will conclude that the decision she ends up making counts as the successful pursuit of her valuable project: making tough choices in order to promote a

[9] It is important to not make too much of this potential connection to Aristotle, as what I have described is a general picture of good deliberation that is consistent with a wide variety of normative theories and needn't take on any of the theoretical baggage unique to Aristotelian virtue ethics (e.g., Aristotle's list of virtues or his commitment to the reciprocity of the virtues).

[10] See, for example, Russell (2014).

greater good, even when moral wrongs must be committed along the way, is simply what it means to be a good politician, general, or union leader. In other cases, she will conceive of either choice as a failure: a good politician neither licensing torture nor allows her constituents to be bombed. In these latter cases, the harm of being in the position is that the choice that must be made will diminish the meaningfulness of her life by undermining the sense in which a valuable project is successfully pursued.[11]

Some roles filed by educators can involve analogous internal contradictions, although the stakes in these cases typically do not match the horrors of traditional descriptions of the problem of dirty hands. For example, a teacher hired by a religious school may be required to cut off inquiries that challenge official church doctrine or use lesson plans that train students to accept a set of foundational religious principles. Performing these functions conflicts in significant ways with approaches to pedagogy grounded in fostering student autonomy (see Gereluk 2012; Reich 2002) or procedurally directive inquiry dialogue (see Gregory 2014). A teacher who accepts such a role, thus, risks either failing to honor the commitments she has made to her employer and to the families of her students or failing to uphold her own pedagogical standards for fostering student autonomy.

An aspect of conscientiousness, then, is to ask the following question: *will I be expected to perform duties in this role where I will have failed in my valuable project no matter what choice I make?* When it comes to deciding what to do, answering this question in the affirmative is not dispositive. This is because there is no overriding obligation to ensure that one lives a maximally meaningful life, and tradeoffs must sometimes be made. Without committing to a framework for comparing goods that may be incommensurable, it may be better, all things considered, for someone's life to be less meaningful than it otherwise would have been than for others to face extremely serious harm. It may be better, all things considered, for a teacher to compromise on her pedagogical commitments in order for a very large number of students to receive an education that is ultimately of a much higher quality than what they otherwise would have experienced. But to the extent that dirtying one's hands is incompatible with succeeding in carrying out one's role responsibilities, one does take a risk—the risk of undermining the meaningfulness of one's life—in accepting a role that involves such choices.[12]

A third dimension of conscientiousness concerns the balance of risks and rewards in the selection of social roles even when there is no concern about conflicts within a role. Consider a common trope: an aspiring actress moves to Los Angeles hoping to find success, fails to win a series of auditions, takes a part time job as a waitress, and gradually, over the years, abandons her dream as her optimism and exuberance are transformed into bitterness and sarcasm. Achieving success as an actor, rock star, or social movement organizer is quite rare, which means that the pursuit of such

[11] To be clear, this point is not grounded in a theoretical commitment to a subjective theory of the meaning of life—although it certainly would be consistent with such a commitment—but in an epistemic claim about people's deliberations about what counts as success in a role. To form a belief, after serious reflection, that the performance of an act is incompatible with my success in a role is to form a fallible judgment on the basis of evidence. Once someone forms such a judgment in such a way, they have a reason to be nervous that accepting a role where such acts may be inevitable is to accept a role where the meaningfulness of their lives may be diminished.

[12] I am grateful to Philip Cook for a conversation at the 2024 North American Association for Philosophy of Education conference that led me to consider this aspect of conscientiousness.

a role carries with it a high risk of failure. A conscientious author must assess whether such a risk is worth the reward.

But crucially, the value of a reward is often uncorrelated to the magnitude of the risk. Consider another common trope: a world-famous musician who, though quite materially successful, has spent so much time touring and recording that his personal life is a series of unhappy marriages ending in divorce rather than a family characterized by stable, loving relationships. Imagine walking into a hospital where the musician is spending the final days of his life, surrounded by memorabilia and newspaper clippings. In a room across the hall, we find a high school teacher who is also at the end of his life. But this man is surrounded by cards from the many students whose lives he touched over his decades of education and mentorship, as well as by his wife, children, and grandchildren.

My intuition is that the life of the latter is most likely more meaningful than that of the former even though the odds of success as a high school teacher are far higher than the odds of achieving fame in music. In the former, the challenge of succeeding is so great that everything else is subordinated to the pursuit of an often-elusive end. In the latter, we can easily conceive meaningful chapters characterized by the pursuit of successful projects: being an early-career teacher and maturing into a mentor for others; figuring out how to be a partner for his wife, then a father for his children, and finally a grandfather for his children's children.

The choice faced by a conscientious author, then, is not merely about how risk-averse to be when considering the difficulty of succeeding in a role. The choice is also about whether to pursue social roles that, even when success is achieved, have a high likelihood of becoming the sole focus of our activities in a way that ultimately undermines the meaningfulness of a life. Whether to pursue such roles despite this risk depends on our confidence in our ability to overcome this challenge, as well as our weighing of meaningfulness against aesthetic value, moral value, and the like.

V. Conclusion

On the one hand, having a variety of mutually supportive social roles can enrich our lives and make them more meaningful. On the other hand, conflicting roles can undermine the meaningfulness of our lives. We should respond to this reality by becoming conscientious authors of the stories of our lives by selecting the right number of roles, evaluating whether the roles we are considering taking on will contain contradictory responsibilities within them, and evaluating the extent to which the risks of taking on a role are outweighed by the potential rewards.

While it may seem obvious that there can be conflicts between role responsibilities, my hope is that this discussion has helpfully articulated the dynamics of these conflicts and, even more importantly, highlighted the stakes. The impact of these conflicts goes beyond exposing us to uncomfortable moments or difficulties, as such conflicts can genuinely threaten the meaningfulness

of our lives. When we live in recognition of this impact, the result is that choices that otherwise seemed trivial are attended to with a greater sense of urgency.[13]

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