

Meaning making, self-determination theory, and the question of wisdom in personality

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Abstract

Self-determination theory (SDT) has advanced the most comprehensive model of motives for human flourishing in the field of personality psychology and beyond. In this article, we evaluate SDT relative to the process of meaning making, particularly from a narrative perspective, showing what SDT can and cannot explain about the construction of self-identity and its relation to human flourishing. On the one hand, SDT explains how subjective assessments of need fulfillment drive the process of self-determined living. The internal motives that follow such fulfillment serve as important themes in people's life stories that predict several markers of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. On the other hand, SDT's focus on subjective fulfillment limits what SDT can explain about how wisdom, which is a canonical good of both eudaimonia and meaning making, helps people make sense of life's more difficult or unfulfilling events. SDT may facilitate a facet of wisdom that is more subjective and experiential but not the critical facet of wisdom defined by objectively more complex structures of interpretation.

KEYWORDS

meaning-making, narrative, self-determination theory, wisdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

Self-determination theory (SDT) offers an elegant set of predictions and a large body of findings on how needs and motives facilitate or thwart human flourishing (reviews include Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2004). However, one of SDT's greatest strengths—its emphasis on the fulfillment or satisfaction of basic psychological needs—is precisely what limits SDT's capacity to explain one of personality's greatest attributes: wisdom. Wisdom has less to do with subjective need fulfillment, satisfaction, and well-being than with the objective, structural features of meaning making through which one subjectively interprets one's actions, needs, and fulfillment. In this article, we examine meaning making as a personality process that facilitates both *well-being as fulfillment-based meaningfulness* (which SDT largely explains) and *wisdom as structural perspectivity* of meaning making (which SDT does not explain). In this model, well-being and wisdom represent two facets of eudaimonic perspectives on a good life that emerge from,

respectively, the subjective content and objective structure of narrative meaning making (Bauer, 2016).

2 | SDT, MEANING MAKING, AND A GOOD LIFE

In this section, we examine SDT as a model of psychological need fulfillment and self-determined motives that facilitate a particular kind of human flourishing, namely, a subjective sense of fulfillment. We then consider the limitations of SDT in explaining how individuals adapt to difficult life events, which leads to a consideration of wisdom as another facet of good life that facilitates a reorganization of one's interpretation of such events.

2.1 | SDT and fulfillment

SDT explains how needs and motives facilitate human flourishing. Six mini-theories of SDT flesh out this general

process: The fulfillment of psychological needs facilitates not only well-being but also internally motivated action, which further facilitates well-being, performance, vitality, adaptive social connections, and other markers of human flourishing (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2012). Thus, much of human flourishing rests on the satisfaction of SDT's three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (basic psychological needs theory; Deci & Ryan, 2000), which can be found across cultures to predict well-being directly (Chen et al., 2015). The relatively more satisfied or fulfilled these needs are for a person, the relatively more likely that the person will attribute causality to internal rather than external sources (causality orientation theory; Deci & Ryan, 1985), be motivated by intrinsic and personally valued concerns rather than external controls like rewards or status (cognitive evaluation theory; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Kasser & Ryan, 1993), perceive himself or herself to be autonomously self-organizing rather than controlled by external sources (organismic integration theory; Ryan & Deci, 2004), form goals around intrinsically satisfying values like intimacy and generativity rather than values like social status or material goods (goal contents theory; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), and have mutually autonomy-supportive relationships (relationships motivation theory; Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

The fulfillment of needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy—as well as the processes of intrinsic motivation, internal regulation, self-determined goals, autonomy-supportive relationships, and organismic development—all rest in no small part on subjective self-appraisals. In other words, the fulfillment or satisfaction of these needs is to no small degree a matter of interpretation and *meaning making*. Indeed, the satisfaction of SDT needs can be thought of as the satisfaction of meanings (Weinstein, Ryan, & Deci, 2012), which is a sense of meaningfulness (Wolf, 2010).

2.2 | SDT, meaning making, and adjusting to life

Encounters with challenging experiences may call into question the assumptions that previously imbued life with a sense of meaning. Such experiences may call into question previously valued goal commitments. In research on “upward spirals” of well-being as rooted in self-determined goals and actions (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, Schkade, 2005; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001), SDT research has tended to showcase well-being above other human pursuits, such as wisdom and adjusting to adversity (although on the topic of need frustration and well-being, see Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). While this research has demonstrated the benefits of internal regulation, we do not learn what happens when the individual is confronted with experiences that throw his or her life in a

tailspin, even for someone with a relatively fulfilled sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Returning to happiness may well be the goal after negative or traumatic life events (King, 2008), but the process of getting to that finish line may be colored by difficult efforts toward making meaning: abandoning or revising cherished sources of meaning and devising new hopes and dreams toward which to strive (King & Hicks, 2007). In this context, *reflection* is likely to be employed to do the hard work of meaning construction that facilitates adaptation (King & Hicks, 2009). People differ greatly in terms of what creates meaning in their lives. The experience of meaning in life is correlated with need satisfaction measures (Trent & King, 2010), but stories are idiosyncratic instantiations of meaning. What “works” for one person—that is, a narrative that leads to closure and reinstatement of functioning, the story that “makes sense” of experience—may offer little comfort to another (Hicks, Cicero, Trent, Burton, & King, 2010). Furthermore, made meanings may not guarantee closure or resolution (Park, 2010); meaning may continue to be revisited or evolve as the solution it provides to challenging experiences is further tested through living (Steger & Park, 2012). Life stories are one avenue toward accomplishing the mission set forth by Henry Murray (1938/2007), to understand the ways that all people are like no other persons.

Now, the SDT response to this challenge may be something along the lines of “yes, but this adaptation follows in the wake of fulfilling the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy.” In response to that point, we say that (a) what differentiates individuals in fulfilling those needs is the capacity for wisdom and (b) adaptation is not defined only in terms of subjectively assessed fulfillment and well-being. Adaptation may emerge in the form of wisdom, such that the person deals with situations more wisely or humanely, even without an attendant boost in feeling good about one's life. In addition, others might benefit from this wisdom, as might the individual him- or herself down the road. In any case, the individual's subjective sense of well-being (whether as hedonic happiness or eudaimonic meaningfulness) is not the only good, the ultimate good, or the primary good in life (Fowers, 2012; Vittersø, 2013).

Consonant with the humanistic idea of organismic valuing (Rogers, 1961; Sheldon Arndt, & Houser-Marko, 2003), common dual process models of self-relevant information processing (e.g., Labouvie-Vief, 2003) impinge on SDT. Specifically, as described by Rogers, individuals are better off, in terms of well-being, when they follow the voice of their innate organism. This idea of following one's genuine inner values is clear in SDT descriptions of directing one's energies toward goals that serve intrinsic or relatively internal motives. It is foundational to humanistic perspectives that the individual should “follow your bliss” (Campbell, Flowers, & Moyers, 1988), with the argument being that

eudaimonia emerges from internal motives of SDT (noting that “follow your bliss” in Campbell’s sense is decidedly not hedonistic but rather derives from the eudaimonic sensibility of the Upanishads). In some sense, then, this organismic valuing process is akin to intuitive information processing: following one’s gut feelings about what paths to take and what decisions to make, so long as that gut sense is concordant with deeper, broader understandings of the self rather than egoistic whims (Sheldon, 2014). It may be that this idea is especially effective when meaning is felt to be rather effortlessly present in the person’s life (King, 2012). Indeed, research shows that when the experience of meaning in life is high, people are more likely to follow their gut feelings or intuitive hunches (Heintzelman & King, 2016).

However, following one’s gut feelings may not suffice when one’s schemas of the self and world are challenged by experience (King & Hicks, 2009). Indeed, Campbell, when later questioned about others’ erroneously hedonic interpretation of his “follow your bliss” advice, reportedly responded, “Maybe I should have said, ‘Follow your blisters’” (Hoxsey, 2014). Meaning making is a process that is thought to be set in motion when events and experiences are discrepant with a person’s preexisting cognitive schemas, expectations, or meaning structures (Park, 2010), as when one must confront the harsher realities of life. This process, though surely not entirely conscious, relies on reflection and deliberation. Actively revising one’s meaning structures means confronting those aspects of experience that are discrepant with expectations and finding a way to assimilate new experiences or to accommodate them by rewriting those meaning structures (Block, 1982), resulting in one’s capacity to generate structures of meaning that incorporate more points of view (e.g., Loevinger, 1976), which is a prominent form of wisdom (Staudinger, 2013). Searching for meaning, then, may not rely on the needs articulated by SDT, and however vital it may be to restoring meaning, the search itself is often distressing (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lortentz, 2008). It may well be that the satisfaction of SDT needs follows in the wake of *wise* meaning making, which subsequently allows people to reinterpret difficult life events in ways that yield need fulfillment.

2.3 | Two facets of a good life: Well-being and wisdom

Models of a good life typically fall into two camps: hedonic or eudaimonic (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonia focuses on pleasure or satisfaction as the primary or ultimate good in life (Haybron, 2008), whereas eudaimonia focuses on meaning or value, which may come in several forms of the good in life, such as fulfillment, wisdom, and moral virtue (Vittersø, 2016). SDT aligns with the eudaimonist model, focusing on measures like vitality, internally engaging motives, fulfillment, and well-being (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008), but not

wisdom, particularly when measured as heightened degrees of thinking complexly about the self and others.

Eudaimonia has roots in Aristotle, yet psychological models of eudaimonia diverge widely from Aristotelian principles (Haybron, 2008). Many (perhaps most) such models approach eudaimonia as a mechanistic product (e.g., an “outcome” as assessed in measures of well-being) rather than as an organismic process (e.g., a dynamic of actions, interactions, and reflections that unfold over time; Bauer, 2016). Aristotle emphasized the latter (Fowers, 2016), as does SDT, where eudaimonic living is “understood as a good and fulfilling way of life” (Ryan & Martela, 2016, p. 109). This focus on action-based processes is part of why SDT is called “organismic” (Ryan & Deci, 2004), in addition to SDT’s focus on the person as a self-organizing system rather than exclusively as a mechanistic system explicable by merely its component parts (Goldstein, 1939).

However, whereas SDT may emphasize Aristotle’s focus on process and activity, SDT—like most psychological models of eudaimonia—diverges from Aristotle’s emphasis on objective criteria by emphasizing subjective appraisals of personal fulfillment (e.g., Haybron, 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Tiberius, 2013). Aristotle’s criteria for a good life emphasized wisdom as objectively defined by experts like himself. Naturally, this position creates problems for measurement and has met with critiques of elitism (e.g., Haybron, 2008; Kashdan, Biswas-Diener, & King, 2008). However, these critiques are not damning, even if they do present justifiable cautions. For example, objectivist criteria are found in measures of wisdom (e.g., Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Labouvie-Vief, 2006; see Staudinger & Glück, 2011) that rely on trained researchers to code the objective degrees or levels of complexity (among other things) in thinking about the self and others.

Subjective fulfillment and objective complexity differentiate two key qualities in eudaimonic models of good life, respectively: subjectively assessed well-being and objectively assessed wisdom (Bauer, 2016). Well-being appears as a quality in both hedonic and eudaimonic models, even if the two models define well-being differently: Hedonic well-being deals exclusively with affect (and cognitive appraisals of it, defined by pleasurable experience and life satisfaction; Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006; Haybron, 2008), whereas eudaimonic well-being largely deals with personal-value fulfillment and meaningfulness (Steger, 2016; for a review of hedonic and eudaimonic models, see Huta & Waterman, 2014). In contrast, wisdom appears as a primary good only for eudaimonic models of a good life (Flanagan, 2007), which extend beyond what is typically called “well-being.”¹ Well-being and wisdom involve different psychological mechanisms and outcomes—indeed, two distinct paths of personality development as well as of a good life—such that people who can think complexly and deeply about their lives (suggesting wisdom) are just as likely to be happy as not

(e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2010; King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000). SDT is a model of human flourishing that explains much of fulfillment and well-being, but not of wisdom in the Aristotelian sense.

In a sense, this deficit is ironic. Although the SDT perspective on well-being is eudaimonic, the relevance of this approach to unhappy yet good lives is limited by humanistic assumptions about happiness. Specifically, from this perspective, true happiness or well-being springs from acting in accord with intrinsic pursuits that provide the essential nutriments of psychological life (the satisfaction of organismic needs; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this sense, we can assume a great deal about the motivations of a person who is truly subjectively happy. However, we do not know very much about a person who has strived mightily through adversity and come out dedicated to a good life—as when a person who enacts a host of virtues such as helping others or cultivating wisdom does not experience satisfaction relative to other people (King & Hicks, 2007).

3 | MEANING AND VALUE: ORIENTATION, FULFILLMENT, AND PERSPECTIVITY

Despite the fact that well-being and Aristotelian wisdom have little overlap, they do converge on the fact that both involve meaning making and value. As noted, meaning itself has many meanings, but we note here the idea that a meaning is a *context*: Meaning is a knowledge structure that serves as a context for other knowledge structures (Baumeister, 1991). People create meanings and have meanings. In this article, we focus on *personal* meanings, which is to say, meanings capture those things that are of critical relevance or *value* to the individual person. In an effort to find some common ground between SDT and meaning making, we suggest that the notion of *value* lies at the heart of both SDT and meaning making. Furthermore, the distinction of three facets of value—value orientation, value fulfillment, and value perspectivity (Bauer, 2016)—helps explain our claim that SDT explains well-being but not wisdom.

Of the three, value orientation and value fulfillment are common to many models of personality. Value orientation and value fulfillment deal with, respectively, what we want

(orientations of value, motives, and needs) and what we have (and degrees of satisfaction thereof). But value perspectivity involves how complexly and coherently we organize our thoughts about value orientations and their fulfillment. Figure 1 depicts value orientation, value fulfillment, and value perspectivity (the latter two of which are forms of value actualization, which plays little role here except to differentiate values from their manifestations). Martela and Steger (2016) offer a compatible, tripartite model that serves as an umbrella model in research on meaning making, which we address in the sections below.

3.1 | Value orientation: Values, motives, and needs

A value orientation refers to anything or to a type of thing that people value, that motivates action, and that people need (Bauer, 2016). People *have* value orientations, which is to say, people have or hold values, motives, and needs that orient their actions. Value orientation refers to the *reasons why* something or someone holds meaning for a person. In terms of SDT, value orientations as motives are plotted along a continuum of regulatory motives, from relatively more internally regulated motives (intrinsic, integrated-extrinsic, and identified-extrinsic) to relatively more externally regulated motives (introjected and extrinsic; Deci & Ryan, 2012). Whereas goal contents theory (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1996) specifies intrinsic and extrinsic goals as “types” (or the *what* of goals), value orientation refers to the intrinsic or external motivations within those goal types (the *why* of those goals). For example, an intrinsic goal type such as “I want to be a teacher” (intrinsic because the putative aim is to contribute to others) might—say, for one person or another—be intrinsically motivated (“because I want to help others”) or extrinsically motivated (“because I like to hear myself talk”—an egoistic motive or value orientation for teaching that was found in a study of narratives of major life decisions; Bauer & McAdams, 2004b). Furthermore, value orientations include basic needs, such as the SDT needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy, which are claimed to be universally held (Chen et al., 2015; Deci & Ryan, 2000). While needs and motives are distinct (see Deci & Ryan, 2000), they both serve as an impetus to action, particularly when compared to the class of phenomena that evaluate the satisfaction or fulfillment of such an impetus. Plus, needs and motives are related functionally. For instance, a need for competence ushers agentic motivations, which usher agentic goals that, if completed satisfactorily, fulfill that need. In this way, both needs and motives *orient* behavior, and Bauer (2016) uses the term “*value* orientation” because these orientations of impetus toward action are orientation toward a particular good in life, which is to say, a value.

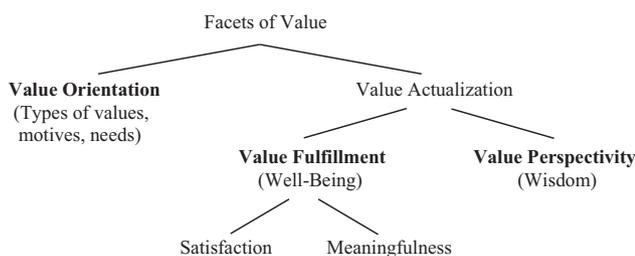


FIGURE 1 Value orientation, value fulfillment, and value perspectivity

Value orientations need not be explicitly claimed, as in “I value love,” “I value wisdom,” or “I value money.” Value orientations may be implicit, as when narrative themes emphasizing the importance of love, wisdom, or money arise in a person’s life story. In meaning making, value orientations are at the heart of self-identity; one identifies with the actions, people, and ideas that one values (which we view as just another way of describing SDT’s “identified” or “integrated” regulation). Other examples of value orientations include SDT’s needs and motives; achievement motives of mastery, performance, approach, and avoidance (Elliot & McGregor, 2001); moral foundations of justice, care, authority, loyalty, and purity (Haidt, 2012); various values like universalism, benevolence, power, security, and stimulation (Schwartz, 2007); and hedonic and eudaimonic motives for action (Huta & Ryan, 2010). As for the latter, value (motives, etc.) can come in either hedonic or eudaimonic form. Whereas hedonists have one value on their list of goods in life (i.e., pleasure; Haybron, 2008), eudaimonists have several values (Tiberius, 2013). Thus, hedonic models of well-being are not especially concerned with distinguishing one value from another, since only one is of primary importance. In contrast, eudaimonic models are especially concerned with distinguishing them, so the notion of value orientations is especially salient. We note, however, that *any* model or measure of well-being values something, whether pleasure, meaningfulness, wisdom, or something else.

People want things for particular purposes or reasons. The purpose or reason *is* the value orientation of a particular meaning. Martela and Steger (2016) use the term *purpose* to categorize this motivational component of meaning. Merely having a value or purpose, even without enacting or fulfilling it, makes people feel good and gives people a sense of purpose and commitment (Baumeister, 1991). But having a value orientation and fulfilling it are not the same thing. Similarly, the purpose of a meaning and its satisfaction are not the same thing (Martela & Steger, 2016), value importance and value enactment are not the same thing (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014), and value orientation and value fulfillment are not the same thing (Bauer, 2016). The satisfaction, enactment, and fulfillment of values all involve the actualization of values, whether measured subjectively or objectively.

3.2 | Value fulfillment: Satisfaction, meaningfulness, and well-being

Value fulfillment refers to the subjective belief that a value orientation has been satisfactorily enacted or manifested in one’s life (Bauer, 2016). Value fulfillment is the satisfaction of value. Similarly, Martela and Steger (2016) define *meaningfulness* in terms of affective satisfactions and motivating purposes. To “have” meaning in one’s life—to make the self-assessment that one has a presence of meaning in life

(Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006)—is to think or feel that one’s life is *meaningful* (Wolf, 2010), or rich in the satisfaction or fulfillment of personally relevant meanings and values. In addition to being a central property of eudaimonic well-being, meaningfulness feels good in a purely affective, hedonic sense (Steger, 2016).

Value fulfillment equates to a subjective sense of both meaningfulness (Wolf, 2010) and well-being (Tiberius, 2014). In other words, having a value fulfilled is to have meaningfulness; having meaningfulness means that one believes that particular values have been enacted satisfactorily in one’s life. And this is important: The sense of meaningfulness *is* a form of well-being—a eudaimonic form of well-being (Bauer, 2016; Tiberius, 2014). Another form of well-being is hedonic satisfaction. Measures of hedonic well-being assess the subjective fulfillment of a single value—*affect-based satisfaction*, period, without reference to specific meanings or contexts in life (Diener et al., 2006; Haybron, 2008). In contrast, measures of eudaimonic well-being assess the subjective fulfillment of any number of values—various, specific meanings in life—in other words, a sense of meaningfulness or a sense of having the presence of meaning in life.

Both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being involve assessments of satisfaction and value fulfillment (linked, notably, by intrinsic motivation – Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008). But whereas hedonic value fulfillment is only about positive or negative satisfactions, eudaimonic value fulfillment is about meaningfulness, and typically specific forms of it (Bauer, 2016). The difference between hedonic and eudaimonic measures is a matter of the level of context specificity when considering the fulfillment of this or that value (Bauer, 2016). For hedonic models, the meaning or context does not matter—all that matters is the positive or negative affect of pleasurable experience or satisfaction. In contrast, for eudaimonic models, the meaning or context is exactly what matters (Bauer, 2016). Value fulfillment as meaningfulness is the satisfaction of a particular orientation of value as enacted in one’s life.

For example, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al., 2006) is an example of eudaimonic value fulfillment and meaningfulness, as it measures satisfaction within the context of meaning, albeit at the broadest or most abstract possible level of context—the presence of meaning “in life.” Another measure that falls into the value fulfillment category of meaningfulness—satisfaction within a context of personally relevant meaning or value—although with even more specific contexts of meaning, is Ryff’s (1989) measure of psychological well-being (PWB). PWB has six dimensions that function, from a meaning-making perspective, as six sources or contexts of meaning or value: autonomy (akin to SDT’s need for autonomy fulfilled), environmental mastery (akin to competence fulfilled), positive relationships (akin to

relatedness fulfilled), purpose in life (akin to MLQ, or general meaning in life fulfilled), self-acceptance (most items are akin to self-esteem; see Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001, on self-esteem as a prominent psychological need), and personal growth (akin to experiential wisdom; see below). While the personal growth dimension involves some items dealing with motivation, the items of PWB almost entirely assess the degree to which each of the six sources of meaning in life are satisfied, fulfilled, present, or had for the person. Thus, PWB measures meaningfulness-as-well-being (Bauer, 2016; Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008). Overall, most models of both hedonia and eudaimonia—including SDT—ascibe to a value fulfillment model of a good life (Bauer, 2016; Fowers, 2016; Tiberius, 2014). In these models, a good life is defined by some value or set of values being *enacted to a satisfactory degree* in one's life.²

Some debate exists regarding how people derive their self-assessments that there is meaningfulness in their lives. One presumption is that people engage in a deliberative review of their lives, perhaps weighing the degree to which their lives feel significant, coherent, and purposeful (Martela & Steger, 2016). However, there is other evidence that self-assessments of meaning are influenced by mood or other proximal inputs, suggesting that people may draw perceptions of meaning from gut feelings or from the environment around them (e.g., King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006). Meaning might just as well arise from effort put forth to make confusing or even traumatic stimuli intelligible, or from registering the pleasure of sunlight on one's skin. At the level of meaning we are concerned with here, a sense of meaningfulness may draw on myriad such inputs but ultimately is concerned with whether life itself is judged to be meaningful to an individual; and this judgment theoretically rests on how certain people interpret that their lives matter and are significant, and embrace concerns beyond their own inward-looking wants and beyond their momentary desires (Steger, 2016). Thus, meaningfulness usually is positioned as an indicator of—or, as we argue here, a form of—eudaimonic well-being (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Meaningfulness can also serve as an indicator of development. People generally tend to ascribe more meaningfulness to their lives in older versus younger adulthood, suggesting that meaningfulness may be one of the fruits of ego development, maturity, and wisdom—topics to which we turn next (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Kasser, Koestner, & Lekes, 2002; Kasser et al., 2014; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001; Pasupathi, 2001; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009).

Value orientations motivate (or are interpreted as having motivated) one's actions, and one may subsequently interpret the enactment of these value motivations to be satisfactory (or to be progressing toward satisfactory enactment). In other words, value fulfillment is not about the enactment itself (e.g., it is not about “walking the talk”); it is about the

satisfactoriness of the enactment of a value orientation (e.g., “walking the talk satisfactorily”; see Sheldon & Krieger, 2014). Whereas enacting one's values (“walking the talk”) correlates with a general sense of well-being, the sense of well-being that comes directly from the enactment of a specific value orientation in a specific action (or set, domain, or context of actions) is equivalent to value fulfillment. The subjective interpretation of satisfactory enactment is interpreted (by the researcher) to be “life satisfaction” if the research participant is thinking (e.g., after being led to think by a self-report questionnaire) about “life in general.” This same subjective interpretation of satisfactory enactment is interpreted (by the researcher) to be “meaningfulness” if the research participant is thinking about this or that context of value (again, that is, a meaning) in life, such as personal relationships, a sense of mastery in life, or a sense of one's personal growth (as in Ryff, 1989).

For Martela and Steger (2016), meaningfulness combines the motivational component of meaning (i.e., what they call “purpose” and we call “value orientation”), the affective component (i.e., what they call “significance” and we call “satisfaction”), and the cognitive component (i.e., coherence). Coherence for Martela and Steger (2016) is one dimension of value perspectivity in the present model. The other dimension, complexity, is critical for wisdom.

3.3 | Value perspectivity: Complexity, coherence, and wisdom

Another feature of meaning making (and another facet of value) remains to be considered—its organizational complexity and coherence. Coherence or integration is one cognitive facet of meaning making; complexity or differentiation is another (Suedfeld & Bluck, 1993). Research on value orientations and their fulfillment (by which we mean any research on motives or values and their subjectively perceived satisfaction or enactment) typically leaves out this critical dimension of meaning making, which facilitates meaning reconstruction, adaptation to life's more unfulfilling events, and wisdom. To emphasize the social-cognitive quality of thinking complexly about the self and others, we refer to complexity and coherence of meaning making as value perspectivity (Bauer, 2016). While meaningfulness and value fulfillment require coherence (Martela & Steger, 2016), they do not require complexity. But wisdom does.

The question of wisdom is important not only because it is a key good in life, particularly as a personality characteristic, but also because wisdom is a primary means for adjustment to objectively difficult situations. Not all roads to reflective maturity are happy ones (King, 2001). The wise person may be more likely to recognize the inherent conflict that characterizes the relationships, or the multitude of “right” answers to the central questions of adulthood. In fact,

research has demonstrated that ego development (an important marker of wisdom; Staudinger & Glück, 2011) is independent of self-report measures of psychological well-being (see Bauer et al., 2008; King & Hicks, 2007).

Value perspectivity addresses the fact that some values and meanings are (interpreted as) simple, whereas other values and meanings are (interpreted as) complex. Like value fulfillment, value perspectivity is also an enactment or actualization of particular motives, but perspectivity is not assessed by interpretations of subjective satisfaction. The exhibition of value perspectivity is a more objective matter—a matter of a value's being expressed with objectively more (rather than fewer) perspectives. Value perspectivity is the enactment of thinking complexly and integratively about a particular value or meaning. The mechanisms of value perspectivity are differentiation and integration (along the lines of assimilation and accommodation; Piaget, 1970). It is one thing to *want* to think with a high degree of perspectivity, it is another thing to think that one *does* think with high perspectivity, and it is yet another thing for trained experts to think that one thinks with high perspectivity. Value perspectivity can be defined as an outcome by measures of psychosocial wisdom that deal with conceptual complexity of self and others, not their satisfaction or fulfillment (e.g., Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Kegan, 1982). This general capacity involves, among other things, the ability to think about the self and others complexly and coherently—from multiple points of view, generating alternative points of view. Unlike the fulfillment of meaning (i.e., meaningfulness), which is subjectively assessed, perspectivity is a matter of objective assessment.³

We note that value perspectivity is also *not* the same thing as a causality orientation in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). A high degree of value perspectivity is not the same thing as autonomous causality orientation—just as thinking complexly and coherently is not the same thing as wanting to think complexly and coherently. Value perspectivity is something that as yet has no parallel construct in SDT. Value perspectivity deals with degrees of structural *complexity* and *integration* of personal meanings. Now, SDT is deeply concerned with the concept of integration, such as the integration of self-identity with one's deeply held values (e.g., integration as coherence of actions and self and as unity with others, Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2013; integration, similarly defined, Van der Kaap-Deeder, Vansteenkiste, Van Petegem, Raes, & Soenens, 2016; internalization, Weinstein, Przybylski, & Ryan, 2012; self-concordance, Sheldon, 2014; integrated regulation, Ryan & Deci, 2004), the integration of values and actions (Sheldon & Krieger, 2014), and the integration of goal hierarchies (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). However, in each case just mentioned, the general concept of integration emphasizes an organismic matching of values with actions and self-understanding and *not* an organismic accommodation of thoughts themselves that had been differentiated—as in

various neo-Piagetian approaches to self development, such as Loevinger's (1976) ego development, Labouvie-Vief's (2006) self development, or Kegan's (1982) self development.

SDT researchers have demonstrated interest in the coherence or integration dimension of value perspectivity (where “integration” is not a matter of matching values and actions, etc., as described above), but not necessarily the complexity dimension. For instance, Weinstein et al. (2012) note that the latter camp measures integration as “matters of degree” rather than types but then go on to focus on SDT research that measures types of SDT needs in relation to degrees of subjective fulfillment rather than degrees of organizational complexity in the subject's thinking about the self and others. The integration dimension of value perspectivity deals with the integration of complex or differentiated thoughts about the self and others, *regardless* of how internalized or self-concordant they are. SDT integration may correlate with value perspectivity, but SDT does not posit the cognitive mechanisms that yield high degrees of value perspectivity, namely, assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1970). In narrative research, intrinsically motivated memories correlate with measures of ego development (which is a measure of value perspectivity), but not when also controlling for “integrative memories,” that is, memories with value orientations of value perspectivity (Bauer et al., 2005).

The closest measured construct of which we are aware in SDT is the “interest” dimension of the Index of Autonomous Functioning (IAF; Weinstein et al., 2012), which focuses on the individual's interest in seeking new perspectives and deeper understandings. However, IAF interest is a measure of value *orientation* (not value perspectivity), much akin to narrative themes of reflective growth motivation (Bauer, Park, Montoya, & Wayment, 2015) or to an exploratory or information orientation of identity formation (Berzonsky et al., 2013). Such value orientations toward learning and intellectual growth *predict* increases in demonstrated perspectivity (in the form of ego development; Loevinger, 1976) years later (Bauer & McAdams, 2010). In other words, motives for cognitive development predict cognitive development. But motives are not equivalent to actualizations, and SDT interest is a motive.

4 | NARRATIVE MEANING MAKING AND A GOOD LIFE

Where there is meaning in a person's life, there is a story. Facts, as putatively objective descriptions of someone or of someone's life, do not require a story. But to make sense of facts, one must evaluate them and situate them within a context of meaning. To do this, people use narrative thinking (Bruner, 1990). The self, one of life's more intricate sets of meanings, is itself a story (Taylor, 1989). The self in the

long view is an autobiographical life story of the narrator over time, complete with actions, motives, values, intentions, characters and positioning among them, evaluations of good and bad, themes, scripts, structure, and many other elements of narration (McAdams, 1985). Narrative researchers in recent decades have developed reliable, valid measures for quantifying narrative qualities like affect, changes in affect, values and motives, and complexity and coherence (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). We will explain these measures later, and in relation to SDT, but for now it is important to know that the narrative research cited in this article comes almost entirely from this quantitative, scientific tradition of narrative studies.

Some features of meaning making involve processes that shape the self and development in ways that are not anticipated by SDT. The person, faced with experiences that challenge his or her philosophy of life and structures of meaning making, must search for ways to construct new meanings, a new story in which to situate the self. Stories are the medium by which the person is linked to experience in ways that matter to current and future experience. Research on self-generated narratives of life experience (variably called “autobiographical memories,” “personal narratives,” “self-defining memories,” or more broadly “life stories”) allows for the study of how people integrate (or do not integrate) their actions with a broader understanding of self-identity (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; McAdams, 2013; Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, & Lecours, 2011; Van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2016). Such research can also show how people’s life stories tap into cultural master narratives of a good life (Bauer, 2016; McLean & Syed, 2016), notably, measures of stories conveying well-being on the one hand and wisdom on the other.

Well-being is likely to be found in a story that expresses themes of SDT’s internal motives (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Philippe et al., 2011), coherence (e.g., via closure or the integration of good and bad experiences; Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011), and the fulfillment of SDT needs (Houle & Philippe, 2017; Philippe, Koestner, Beaulieu-Pelletier, Lecours, & Lekes, 2012). Yet wisdom is likely to be found in a story that features Piaget’s (1970) twin mechanisms of cognitive development: assimilation and accommodation. Such a story features explicit exploration, struggle, questioning, consideration of alternative perspectives on a life problem (all features of Piagetian assimilation), and the reconstruction of previous meanings of one’s life (i.e., Piagetian accommodation; e.g., Bauer et al., 2005; King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl, Helson, & John, 2013; Weststrate & Glück, 2017). The difficult work of exploration of self in personal narratives, resulting in a self that has been changed by experience, is evident in the stories told by the relatively more psychosocially developed person (Bauer, 2015; King, 2011) and predicts mature development over time (Bauer & McAdams, 2010; King & Hicks, 2007).

5 | A GOOD LIFE STORY AS CONVEYED VIA NARRATIVE TONE, THEME, AND STRUCTURE

Life stories are like any other story in that the narrator uses particular elements or tools of narration to convey particular elements of personal meaning. Here, we consider three such elements in people’s life stories—tone, theme, and structure—that have ties to SDT and measures of a good life (Bauer, 2016). A brief overview might help: Measures of narrative tone assess positive and negative affect and satisfaction, which correspond to measures of hedonic happiness. Measures of narrative theme assess values and motives, revealing the narrator’s value orientations, such as orientations toward the SDT needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy and toward SDT’s sliding scale of external-to-internal motives. In other words, narrative tones convey *whether* events turn out to be good or bad, whereas narrative themes convey *why* (Bauer, 2016). Tones convey a narrative’s affect and satisfactions, whereas themes convey a narrative’s particular values, motives, needs, reasons, and purposes for action. Tones and themes both convey the content of a narrative, but narrative structure conveys how those tones and themes are arranged in their degrees of complexity and coherence (McAdams, 1985, 1993). Measures of narrative structure assess degrees of perspectivity, regardless of the positive or negative tone or the types of motivational themes. Measures of structural perspectivity correspond to measures that emphasize Aristotle’s objectivist criteria of wisdom. Table 1 presents a conceptual overview of ties among meaning making, narrative, SDT, and models of a good life.

5.1 | Tone: How narratives convey affect and satisfaction

Tone is the simplest form of evaluation in narrative meaning making. Narrative tone refers to the positive or negative *affect* of a narrative (McAdams, 1993). Importantly for the narrative study of growth and wisdom, affective tone can change, not just from one event to another but even within one event in the person’s life (an affective sequence; Adler, 2012), as when a difficult event turns out well. One notable example is the construct of redemption (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001), in which a story starts off bad (defined by negative affect in the narrative) and ends up being good (defined by positive affect). Redemption may refer to a narrator’s assessment either of events changing from bad to good or of the self as changing or improving from bad to good (i.e., self-redemption; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Other scenarios of “positive affective sequences” include happy endings, closure, and positive resolutions (King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006), all of which rest primarily on

TABLE 1 Corresponding features of meaning making, narrative, SDT, and a good life

Meaning making	Narrative	SDT	The good in life	
Affect/satisfaction	Tone	N/A	Happiness	Hedonia
Value orientation	Theme	Needs and motives	Values	Eudaimonia ^a
Value fulfillment	Positive tone + theme	Need fulfillment Satisfactory motive enactment	Meaningfulness	Eudaimonia ^a
Value perspectivity	Structure + eudaimonic theme	N/A	Wisdom	Eudaimonia ^a

Note: SDT = self-determination theory.

^aHere, eudaimonia is characterized as it is typically differentiated from hedonia (see Huta & Waterman, 2014). However, some models of eudaimonia encompass hedonic happiness as well (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2010). Table modified from Bauer (2016).

affective evaluations that events turned out well, from the narrator's point of view—and all of which correspond to measures of subjective well-being.

While redemption may involve humanistic virtues such as generativity (McAdams & Guo, 2015) and personal growth (ignorance to enlightenment, sin to salvation; McAdams, 2006), we note that redemption may also involve materialistic values (rags to riches) and egoistic motives for self-image and ethnocentrism (McAdams, 2006). The narrative measure of redemption (McAdams, 1999) ultimately focuses on the common denominator of narrative affect—a change from bad to good—as the link among all these motives. In other words, the measure of redemption sequences assesses changes in affect without regard to value or motivation. Despite the aforementioned ties to well-being, positive changes in narrative tone (e.g., redemption sequences) do not uniformly predict well-being. For instance, redemption sequences have shown demonstrated ties to well-being and psychological adjustment during difficult times (e.g., Dunlop & Tracy, 2013), but in narratives of good or happy events, redemption sequences have been shown to predict lower levels of well-being (Bauer, Graham, Lauber, & Lynch, 2017).

5.2 | Theme: How narratives convey values and motives

Narrative themes emerge in personal stories when narrators describe what they themselves value about events and persons (and not just whether those events and persons are deemed good or bad). In other words, themes convey the *types* of things that narrators value and that motivate and drive the narrators. Two of the most common motives and needs are agency (e.g., power, having an impact, and mastery) and communion (e.g., connectedness, intimacy, and love; McAdams, 1993, 2013), which correspond, respectively, to the SDT needs for competence and relatedness (Bauer & McAdams, 2000).⁴

SDT claims that its needs are universal (e.g., Chen et al., 2015), so everyone's stories should exhibit themes of agency

and communion, so long as basic physiological and safety-oriented needs are met. However, no research to our knowledge has addressed this specific question; narrative research on SDT needs has instead focused on need *satisfaction* (e.g., Philippe et al., 2012), not whether the SDT needs are universally exhibited in people's life stories. Still, we do know this: Given the opportunity to tell several episodes in one's life story, themes of agency and communion appear in almost everyone's life story in one episode or another (e.g., McAdams et al., 2006; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996).

Narrative themes of agency and communion are typically studied as motives, not needs, so research on agentic and communal themes measures them as matters of degree—that is, how much a personal narrative emphasizes agentic and communal motives. Notably, agentic and communal motives each come in either relatively self-determined or relatively controlled forms (Bauer & McAdams, 2000). Communal themes are often studied as self-determined, as when narrators emphasize the internally motivated qualities of their relationships (they are enjoyable or otherwise personally meaningful; see McAdams, 1999). However, externally motivated qualities of communal themes emerge in stories emphasizing how a relationship either might confer status on the narrator or is driven by the mere need to belong rather than the more internal motive to engage in mutual, reciprocal relationships (see Bauer & McAdams, 2004b, 2010). The fact that communal themes tend to be operationally defined with what SDT calls internal, self-determined motives is reflected in the finding that communal themes tend to correlate with well-being (Bauer & McAdams, 2000). In contrast, agentic themes overall tend not to correlate with well-being because their operational definitions equally emphasize internal (personal mastery, personally meaningful achievements) and external (power, status, victory) motives (Bauer & McAdams, 2000). Only internally motivated, agentic themes predict well-being (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b, 2010).

The SDT need for autonomy maps less neatly onto agentic or communal themes than do the other two needs. As

an agentic theme, a need (or motive) for autonomy is expressed in narratives emphasizing concerns like personal control and becoming one's own self. As a communal theme, a need (or motive) for autonomy might be expressed in narratives emphasizing the mutual support of autonomy in a mature relationship (Knee et al., 2013), although we know of no narrative research on this topic specifically. A theme of autonomy might be alternatively expressed in stories emphasizing the personal importance placed on reflection on the self and others (Weinstein et al., 2011). Defined this way, themes of autonomy have much in common with themes of reflective growth (Bauer, 2016), but only if the operational definition includes an emphasis on exploration and differentiation (e.g., Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Suedfeld & Bluck, 1993; Woike, Gershkovich, Piorkowski, & Polo, 1999), and not just integration.

Overall, self-determined themes in narratives (i.e., stories emphasizing autonomous, internally extrinsic, or intrinsic motives) have a demonstrated tie to well-being (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b, 2010; Bauer et al., 2005, 2017; Philippe et al., 2011; Weinstein et al., 2011). Notably, intrinsically motivated memories predicted well-being, but integratively motivated memories did not (Philippe et al., 2011), replicating past research showing that intrinsic memories correspond to well-being, whereas integrative memories correspond to a key measure of wisdom (Staudinger & Glück, 2011), namely, Loevinger's (1976) ego development (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b; Bauer et al., 2005). However, one set of studies did show correlations between self-reports (note: not researchers' coding) of taking another's perspective and three kinds of well-being: vitality, meaning in life, and relatedness satisfaction (Weinstein et al., 2011). Then again, the tie between integrative/reflective motives and well-being has been found in both narrative and non-narrative research, but *not* when controlling for internally motivated themes and motives (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Bauer et al., 2005). In these studies, when simultaneously controlling for each other, themes of experiential growth (stories with intrinsic or internal motives) predict well-being, whereas themes of reflective growth predict reflective wisdom.

Finally, we reiterate the distinction between value orientations (measured in narratives by themes) and value actualizations, which are measured by value fulfillment or value perspectivity. Value fulfillment is measured in narratives by positive/satisfaction-confirming tones associated with a theme—or measured in non-narrative form by self-report scales of well-being or other forms of meaningfulness (e.g., Steger et al., 2006; Ryff, 1989). Need satisfaction is one form of value fulfillment. Narratives of autobiographical memories that convey higher levels of SDT need satisfaction correlated with higher levels of well-being concurrently (much as in non-narrative research; Philippe et al., 2011) and

increases in well-being prospectively (Houle & Philippe, 2017; Philippe et al., 2012). Value perspectivity is measured in narratives that in fact involve (e.g., as rated reliably by multiple researchers) higher degrees of complexity and coherence (Bauer, 2016).

5.3 | Structure: How narratives convey perspectivity

Narrative structure and narrative content are closely intertwined. Narrative structure is how narrative contents are organized. Of course, tone and theme also organize a narrative, but in terms of affect (e.g., redemption sequences from bad to good) and particular personal values (e.g., growth themes of eudaimonic, humanistic, and organismic values), rather than in terms of differentiated and integrated positioning. However, narrative structure, to the degree it is a phenomenon distinct from narrative content, refers largely (or at least as it is most widely studied) to the degrees of differentiation and integration, or degrees of psychosocial *perspectivity* (Bauer, 2016).

Narratives show differentiation in several ways, such as complexity of detail, cataloguing multiple emotions or thoughts on a single event, comparing and contrasting the views of the self and others, and positing multiple, alternative courses of action. In a word, narratives that convey a relatively greater degree of differentiation are relatively *complex*. Narratives show integration in several ways as well, but perhaps the most commonly measured way is through narrative *coherence*. A coherent narrative may link (Habermas & De Silveira, 2008) points of time together in a straightforward manner (temporal coherence or continuity), events and experiences together in terms of similar motives or values (thematic coherence), or causes and effects together in a readily accessible manner (causal coherence). Other ways to show integration are through Piagetian accommodation (i.e., the linking together of two previously disconnected ideas, here with regard to one's life; e.g., King et al., 2000) and self-event connections that link specific experiences to the narrator's broader self-identity (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001b; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007).

Narratives with high degrees of integration can be either complex (with great differentiation) or simple (with little differentiation; Woike et al., 1999). Narratives with high degrees of both differentiation and integration have high degrees of what is called integrative complexity (Suedfeld & Bluck, 1993) or autobiographical reasoning (e.g., McLean & Fournier, 2008; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). In non-narrative but still open-ended measures of self-identity, Loevinger's (1976) theory of ego development provides a deep examination of the characteristics of varying levels of the structure of narrative self-identity (McAdams, 1985). These structural measures of narrative self-identity tend not to predict well-being (for reviews, see Bauer et al., 2008;

Flanagan, 1991; King & Hicks, 2007), but they do predict measures of adaptation to challenging life events and personal growth (e.g., Bursik, 1991; McLean & Fournier, 2008).

In contrast to narrative themes, SDT offers little by way of mechanism or process to explain perspectivity in narrative structure. One thought is that if the SDT needs of competence and relatedness correspond to narrative themes of agency and communion, then perhaps the SDT need of autonomy corresponds to perspectivity in narrative structure (Bauer & McAdams, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2004) have suggested that more internally regulated motivations, as a personality characteristic, may correspond to higher levels of Loevinger's (1976) ego development (which again is a measure of perspectivity). Indeed, narratives that feature internally regulated motives—in the form of experiential growth themes—do correlate with higher levels of ego development in bivariate correlations, but reflective growth themes (thematic motives for learning and wisdom; see below) fully explain those correlations (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b, 2010; Bauer et al., 2005).

The reason for this lack of relation between SDT and structural perspectivity and its development is that SDT is a theory that explains need fulfillment, not complexity and coherence of thinking about those needs and their fulfillment. In situations of loss or potential trauma, when levels of subjective fulfillment diminish, it is structural perspectivity that offers alternative paths for the reconstruction of meaning. In other words, even though SDT explains much of what people value most in life, SDT does not explain reflective wisdom.

5.4 | Summary

The distinctions between tone and theme and between content and structure are critical. The distinction between tone and theme in narratives corresponds exactly to the critical distinction between affect (which includes positive or negative satisfactions) and value in meaning making more generally (Martela, Ryan, & Steger, 2017). Tone conveys whether an event is satisfying to the narrator. Theme conveys why the event is important to the narrator. Neither tone nor theme alone can convey the fulfillment of a need or the satisfactory enactment of a motive. The presence of a theme does not indicate that one's value orientations have been enacted or fulfilled. When positive narrative tones are linked in a narrative to particular SDT needs and internal motives, those narratives reflect the fulfillment of SDT needs and the satisfactory enactment of SDT motives. Not coincidentally, such scenarios are how a narrative conveys meaningfulness and a sense of eudaimonic well-being; this is what meaningfulness sounds like (Bauer, 2016). Only structure—with an emphasis on degrees of complexity rather than merely integration—can convey the objective perspectivity that characterizes wisdom, which has no corresponding mechanism in SDT.

6 | WISDOM, NARRATIVE MEANING MAKING, AND SDT

Some researchers of wisdom have concluded that practical wisdom is essentially a narrative phenomenon (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Ferrari, Weststrate, & Petro, 2013). Wisdom in thinking about the good in lived contexts is exhibited, if anywhere, in story form. For these researchers, it is not the case that wisdom is merely reflected or well illustrated in narrative form; wisdom itself is constructed in narrative form. Among the various elements of narrative, structural perspectivity is most characteristic of Aristotelian *arete*, or excellence in practical wisdom (Bauer, 2016). However, wisdom is not simply about thinking complexly and coherently; Hitler thought complexly and coherently. The structural perspectivity of narration is valueless, and practical wisdom—the kind of wisdom that leads to desirable outcomes for the self and others—is an ethical concern, rooted in humane value orientations. In this section, we present the case that wisdom involves thinking complexly and coherently (expressed in narrative structure) about eudaimonic, humanistic concerns (expressed in narrative themes) in ways that predict or lead to desirable outcomes (expressed in narrative tone).

6.1 | Two facets of wisdom

Aristotle's portrayal of practical wisdom (as opposed to philosophic wisdom) has two main components that have surfaced in dominant models of wisdom in psychological science today. He explains that practical wisdom comes in two forms: The person who has practical wisdom “can see what is good for themselves and what is good for [people] in general” (Aristotle, 1966, p. 143). Importantly, for Aristotle, seeing “what is good for people in general” *does not refer to what makes people feel good subjectively* (although he acknowledges such satisfactions as important in life). Rather, for Aristotle, what is good for people in general is *wisdom, which he means to define objectively in terms of highly cultivated, intellectual reasoning about practical matters in life*. Aristotle's objectivist approach to wisdom stands at odds—both in practice and in theory—with much of modern psychological science's study not only of a good life (Haybron, 2008) but also of wisdom specifically. Much of the research on wisdom defines wisdom operationally in terms of subjective assessments of whether one values qualities of wisdom such as learning, perspective taking, and critically questioning one's own assumptions.

Staudinger and Glück (2011) explain that personal wisdom involves capabilities for thinking relatively deeply about the self and others, considering alternative points of view, and regulating one's own motives to align courses of action with such considerations (e.g., Ardel, 2003; Labouvie-Vief,

2003; Loevinger, 1976; the Personal Growth subscale of PWB, Ryff, 1989; Webster, 2003). However, we note a distinct contrast among those measures. On the one hand are measures that assess value orientations and value fulfillment (Ardelt, Ryff, Webster). On the other hand are measures that assess value perspectivity (Labouvie-Vief, Loevinger). The latter measures are decidedly more aligned with Aristotle's objectivist criteria for *arete* in practical reasoning than are the former measures (and than is SDT).⁵

That said, Aristotle did emphasize the importance of eudaimonia as excellence in lived action (e.g., Fowers, 2012) rather than as an evaluated state or status of the person, which has been emphasized in SDT (Ryan & Frederick, 1997; Ryan & Martela, 2016; Ryan et al., 2008). In other words, it involves knowing how to navigate one's life (i.e., making choices, taking actions, interpreting actions) in ways that facilitate meaningfulness and psychological well-being for both the self and others, which is to say, in ways that facilitate humanistically oriented experiences (again, not just for the self but for others too, as in the SDT concept of mutual autonomy support; Knee et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2006). This wisdom of focusing on humanistically oriented experiences—on humane experience—is the kind of wisdom that Ryff (2013) claims is found in psychological well-being (which is inherently eudaimonic, not hedonic), particularly in terms of well-being with regard to personal growth. These measures rely on subjective self-report and so have less to do with the objectivist criteria for the wisdom of Aristotle (Haybron, 2008).

But the question arises: Is this even wisdom? On the one hand, it is well-being, not wisdom. On the other hand, if a person strives toward meaningfulness, particularly in Ryff's dimension of personal growth, is that not wise? Even taking the question of growth out of the equation, if a person merely *has* well-being or meaning in life, people generally assume that this person is doing *something* right, something wise. People think, *Things turned out well or meaningful, so the person must have been wise*. However, such thinking is prone toward confirmation bias. The mere presence of well-being—even eudaimonic well-being—is not grounds for the assessment of wisdom. People “stumble” onto happiness routinely, owing nothing to wisdom (Gilbert, 2007). Having a satisfying or meaningful life has little to do with thinking complexly about it (Bauer et al., 2008; King & Hicks, 2007; although coherence is more likely, as it tends to correlate with well-being, e.g., Baerger & McAdams, 1999). Value fulfillment is not value perspectivity. Narrative structure is not narrative content. Happiness is not wisdom.

Then again, the mere presence of complex reasoning about the self and others is not exclusive grounds for the assessment of wisdom either. The complex thinking of value perspectivity may be what differentiates wisdom from “merely” self-determined meaningfulness, but wisdom

without humanistic concern is “merely” “expert knowledge.” Expert knowledge is the defining characteristic of wisdom in the Berlin wisdom model (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), which is too cold, too abstract, and too detached from a grounding in humane concerns; Staudinger (2013) categorizes expert knowledge as a form of general wisdom rather than personal wisdom.

Furthermore, wisdom also has to do with *what works*—with predicting successful outcomes, with enacting value orientations for self-determination and wisdom successfully. Complex thinking hardly ensures a productive, constructive course of action. Complex thinking that leads to the suffering of self and others is hardly wise; it is merely complex. But the combination sounds wise—thinking with perspectivity that leads to events that turn out well for the self and others. SDT plays a role in that development of wisdom, but from the experiential rather than the reflective side of wisdom.

6.2 | Two facets of wisdom and narrative meaning making

Ferrari et al. (2013) point out that narratives allow for wise reflections both on one's own lived experiences and on hypothetical situations. From a narrative perspective, a life story conveys wisdom when the story features eudaimonic, humanistic themes (i.e., value orientation) with a complex and coherent narrative structure—and, to the degree that wisdom also involves desirable outcomes, a tone that ends on a relatively positive note. Furthermore, if wisdom is constructed in narratives, then narratives must offer tools for constructing and cultivating the experiential and reflective facets of wisdom. Here, we argue that narrative theme, structure, and tone each reveal important features of wisdom (and other qualities of a good life). Narrative theme conveys the value, motive, reason, or purpose of the event—that is, *why* the event is good or not—and whether those values involve eudaimonic, humanistic, and organismic orientations. Narrative structure conveys how complexly and coherently one thinks about the what and why of the event. Narrative tone conveys whether an event with such themes and structure turns out to be good or not.

Narratives also open a window to studying the developmental nature of wisdom (Bauer, 2016; Ferrari et al., 2013). Wink and colleagues (Wink & Dillon, 2013; Wink & Staudinger, 2016) have aligned the notion of personal growth with the notion of wisdom, but they mean something different than the sense of meaningfulness that comes from one's thinking that one has attained personal growth, again pointing to the necessity for distinguishing wisdom as meaningfulness from wisdom as reflectiveness. They focus on wisdom as a process of narrative meaning-making, with an emphasis on the structural complexity or perspectivity of wisdom in personal narratives.

TABLE 2 Sample measures of value orientations and value actualizations according to qualities of a good life

Qualities of a good life	Value orientations: Values, motives, and needs	Value actualizations: Successful enactment of value orientations
Happiness Pleasurable experience and satisfaction	Hedonic value orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative measure: Values/motives to cultivate a pleasure and satisfaction exclusively (non-eudaimonic/humanistic themes) • Non-narrative measure: Hedonic motives for action (Huta & Waterman) 	Value fulfillment as satisfaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative measure: Positive tone, redemption sequence (McAdams); closure (King); positive resolution (Lilgendahl) • Non-narrative measure: Subjective well-being (Diener)
Meaningfulness Enacting personally meaningful activities and relationships	Eudaimonic value orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative measure: Experiential growth themes (Bauer; Philippe) • Non-narrative measures: Eudaimonic motives for action; SDT motives and needs 	Value fulfillment as meaningfulness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative measure: Positive tone + Experiential growth theme • Non-narrative measures: Psychological well-being (Ryff); Meaning in Life–Presence (Steger)
Wisdom Thinking complexly and coherently about the self and others	Eudaimonic value orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative measure: Reflective growth themes (Bauer) • Non-narrative measure: Wanting reflective wisdom (some items of Ardel); identity exploration (Berzonsky) 	Value perspectivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative measures: Integrative complexity (Suedfeld & Bluck); differentiation and integration (Woike); differentiated processing (Lilgendahl); accommodation (King); Subject-Object Interview (Kegan) • Non-narrative measure: Sentence Completion Test of Ego Development (Loevinger)

Note. The names in this table are the primary authors of the measures in question. Their work is cited in the text.

Two narrative themes express people's values and motives for cultivating the humane concern and perspectivity of wisdom: experiential growth themes and reflective growth themes—corresponding to non-narrative measures of meaningfulness and perspectivity-focused measures of wisdom (Bauer, 2016). Experiential growth themes predict meaningfulness measured as, for example, psychological well-being (Ryff & Singer, 2008) or the presence of meaning in life (Steger et al., 2006), whereas reflective growth themes predict perspectivity-oriented measures of wisdom, such as Loevinger's (1976) ego development. Table 2 presents an overview of the qualities of a good life, their corresponding value orientations and value actualizations, and sample measures (both narrative and non-narrative) that correspond to each quality of a good life.⁶

6.2.1 | Experiential growth themes

Experiential growth themes showcase the value and motives for cultivating personally meaningful activities and relationships, rather than the value and motives for status, approval, and appearances. These growth themes are defined operationally in direct terms of SDT (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). As with non-narrative research on internally directed motives and goals, experiential growth themes (in both narratives of important life memories and

narratives of major life goals) show consistent correlations with well-being. Notably for the development of experiential wisdom, SDT's internal motives predict higher levels of well-being with age cross-sectionally (non-narrative research, Sheldon & Kasser, 2001; narrative research, e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004a) and even prospective increases in well-being with age longitudinally (non-narrative, Kasser, et al. 2002; narrative, Bauer & McAdams, 2010).

However, we wish to emphasize that none of this research is originally framed in terms of wisdom. Rather, like SDT, this work is framed in terms of values or motives and well-being (although with an emphasis on eudaimonic well-being). Our rationale for framing this research in terms of wisdom comes from the wisdom research itself (e.g., Staudinger & Glück, 2011), where much of the operational definition of wisdom is caught up in measures of meaningfulness—in meaningful actions turning out well—as explained earlier. Again, we argue that such approaches to wisdom neglect objective perspectivity in wisdom.

6.2.2 | Reflective growth themes

It is one thing to think complexly and coherently and another thing to value or *want* to think complexly and coherently. Reflective growth themes emphasize a value orientation for thinking complexly and coherently. A narrative structure that

is complex and coherent reflects thinking that is in fact complex and coherent (which is to say, as a value actualization of structural perspectivity). Reflective growth themes convey the personal *valuing* of wisdom's heightened perspectivity. Reflective growth themes are found in narratives that feature a desire, value, or motive for deepening one's conceptual understanding (not felt experience) of the self and/or others, for taking multiple points of view, for learning about one's position in a world of others, for questioning one's assumptions, and other such concerns for differentiating and integrating one's understanding of life (Bauer, 2016). Thus, reflective growth themes involve a *valuing* of the Piagetian mechanisms of cognitive development (Piaget, 1970) in a psychosocial context.

Reflective growth themes convey the *desire* for reflective wisdom, not the attainment of reflective wisdom. Several measures of autobiographical reasoning and narrative differentiation/complexity and integration/coherence can be readily framed as measures of structural perspectivity *but not reflective growth themes*. Some of these measures deal with reflective wisdom directly (Bluck & Glück, 2004; Weststrate & Glück, 2017), where demonstrated wisdom in narratives ties to adjustment to difficult life experiences. Most measures correspond to wisdom in terms of narrative structure—measures such as life lessons and insights about the self (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004), growth from transgressions (Mansfield, Pasupathi, & McLean, 2015), the differentiation facet of self-transformation and self-growth (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; Pals, 2006), and various forms of self–event connections or heightened degrees of processing that involve exploration, differentiation, perspective taking, or integrative complexity (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001b; Bauer et al., 2005; Blagov & Singer, 2004; Graci & Fivush, in press; King & Hicks, 2007; King & Noelle, 2005; King et al., 2000; King & Smith, 2004; Lilgendahl et al., 2013; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Pals, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Suedfeld & Bluck, 1993; Woike, Lavezzary, & Barsky, 2001). Most of these measures correlate with measures of wisdom as Staudinger defines it (2013). However, importantly, all these narrative measures involve eudaimonic, humanistic themes *but are not coded as such*. Themes of experiential growth are implicitly embedded in the coding systems without being identified as such. In other words, narratives that are structurally complex and coherent but that deal with selfish, egoistic, or materialistic concerns do not appear to get high scores on these measures.

As might be hoped for those who believe in the possibility of cultivating wisdom, reflective growth themes in narratives of major life goals (i.e., an overarching desire in life for reflective wisdom) have predicted increases in levels of ego development (Loevinger, 1976; i.e., increases in the attainment of reflective wisdom) 3 years later (Bauer & McAdams,

2010). However, reflective growth themes do not predict well-being, and experiential growth themes alone (which are based on SDT's internal motives) do not predict ego development (Bauer et al., 2008). Similarly, Weinstein et al. (2012) note that not all eudaimonic motives tend toward happiness.

6.3 | SDT, narrative adjustment to life, and wisdom

Let's return to the idea that SDT has difficulty accounting for how people adjust to life's roadblocks and tragedies. To the degree that people *do* adjust, they do so by reconstructing the meanings in their life narratives (Adler, 2012; Bauer & Bonanno, 2001a; King et al., 2000; Lilgendahl et al., 2013; Neimeyer, 2006). Much of this process is attributable to the mechanisms and process of reflective growth, leading to the perspectivity-focused facet of wisdom, which allows the person to envision alternative courses of action and interpretations to deal with an objectively difficult situation. At the heart of a difficult situation is a sense of disequilibrium, much along the lines of Piagetian disequilibrium in cognitive development. Disequilibrium is essentially the sense that one's needs for conceptual understanding are not met. According to SDT, the path is already set toward low levels of well-being. But to the degree that the person meets this disequilibrium actively with processes of differentiation and integration (e.g., by interpreting the situation in terms of reflective growth themes), the person is in a better position to adjust (Bursik, 1991).

Perhaps this tendency of the person to apply reflective growth themes is a product of a relatively fulfilled need for autonomy, which allows the person to take control of the situation (Hodgins, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Even so, it is difficult to imagine that fulfilled needs for autonomy automatically yield reflective meaning making, at least at the present time in SDT research. Then again, the pervasive fact of disequilibrium and its resolution in the twin processes of assimilation/differentiation and accommodation/integration suggest that another basic psychological need besides SDT's three needs is a conceptual understanding of the self and others, geared more toward the reflective than experiential facet of wisdom.

7 | CONCLUSION

SDT goes a long way in explaining the motivational foundation of human flourishing in personality and beyond. While SDT principles have been shown to operate in narrative meaning making, other features of narrative meaning making—particularly in the contexts of life's difficulties and tragedies and of meaning making and reflective wisdom—are

not explicable by SDT. The reason has to do with SDT's focus on value fulfillment, which is subjectively construed, rather than on objectively demonstrated capacities for generating multiple and alternative perspectives on the self and others (e.g., as measured by ego development; Loewinger, 1976). In narrative meaning making, narrative tone and theme combine to convey value fulfillment, but only narrative structure conveys value perspectivity. A life story that conveys personal wisdom seems to involve all three: a complex and coherent understanding (in narrative structure) of humanistic concerns (in narrative themes) that turn out well (in narrative tone) in one's life. We note, however, that these capacities for reflective wisdom are far from incompatible with SDT, as SDT and many models of wisdom take an organismic perspective on the person. We hope that this article stimulates empirical research on the links between SDT fulfillment and the development of reflective wisdom as a personality characteristic.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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NOTES

¹ However, when well-being is defined so broadly as the wellness of one's being, wisdom can also be considered a facet of well-being (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008).

² While such assessments are typically subjective (as in self-report measures of either subjective well-being or psychological well-being), there is no reason why some objective measure of a person's meaningfulness in life might also be of predictive validity, just as with other-reports of one's personality traits (Bauer, 2016).

³ Throughout this article, by *objective* we mean objective in a relative sense, and more specifically in a measurement sense: An objective assessment of a person is one that is made by observers who are trained experts and who are not invested in the person's own subjective valuing or welfare. The question of objectivity versus subjectivity is of course more complex, especially in the scientific measurement of personal narratives. For a mapping of various forms of objectivity and subjectivity in measurement that applies to all measures of personality, particularly in the measurement of hedonic and eudaimonic goods in life, see Bauer (2016).

⁴ We note at the outset that SDT needs and motives can be studied as functioning both within narratives (e.g., as measures of narrative themes; Bauer & McAdams, 2000) and without narratives (e.g., as non-narrative measures). We also note that, while narrative and non-narrative measures can tap into different levels of personality

(McAdams, 2013), narrative and non-narrative measures can tap into the same features of a good life, such as well-being and wisdom (which are ultimately measures of personality). The difference there is that narrative measures situate, for example, motives and their fulfillments within the lived context of specific actions in a person's life, whereas non-narrative measures typically assess motives and their fulfillments in more general, decontextualized forms (Bauer et al., 2017).

⁵ This is not to say that psychological criteria for wisdom or eudaimonia must closely reflect the Aristotelian model. However, several psychological models of eudaimonia do claim to reflect Aristotle's principles, despite those models' focus on subjective fulfillment, which is not of primary concern for Aristotelian eudaimonia.

⁶ We note that narrative measures and non-narrative measures *each* can assess *either* value orientations or value actualizations. In narrative measures, tone and structure convey value actualizations, namely, satisfaction and perspectivity, respectively, whereas theme conveys value orientation. (Positive tone and eudaimonic themes combine to convey value fulfillment, or meaningfulness.) Non-narrative measures also convey value actualizations (e.g., well-being and need fulfillment scales) and value orientations (e.g., motivation scales).

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