

Meaning without Ego

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Abstract

Thaddeus Metz in *Meaning in Life* centers his research within western philosophical thought. I will engage early Buddhism to see whether its thinking about meaning is compatible with Metz's fundamentality theory of what makes life meaningful. My thesis is: Early Buddhist thinking generally supports a fundamentality reading of meaning but in the ethical state of *nibbāna* (nirvana) the *Arahant* (enlightened one) is in a state that has access to the pure potentiality for meaning.

1. Introduction

Thaddeus Metz in *Meaning in Life* explains that his "...fundamentality theory is an improvement over extant rivals; I do not mean to suggest that it is the last word on what matters."¹ This concession is appropriate considering that Metz centers his critique of meaning theory within research done primarily in English speaking journals and classic European sources.² This, of course, leaves room for consideration of those philosophical treatises and journals in other languages and places. If fundamentality theory is "the one to beat" as Metz claims, then we must begin to frame the theory against other philosophies that were not part of his analysis.³ I will not attempt to subject the tenets of fundamentality theory to all other philosophical writing on the subject of meaning in life. Rather I will narrowly consider fundamentality theory in relationship to the early Buddhist theory of knowledge, principally from the Pali Canon. My thesis is:

Early Buddhist thinking generally supports a fundamentality reading of meaning but in the ethical state of *nibbāna* (nirvana) the *Arahant* (enlightened one) is in a state that has access to the pure potentiality for

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¹ Metz, (2013), p. 236.

² Metz, (2013), p. 9.

³ Metz, (2013), p. 249.

meaning.⁴

English sometimes is not helpful because its speakers want to ascribe an exact meaning to a word or phrase. The phrase ‘access to’, defined as ‘being available to’ is not completely accurate. What I mean is that the pure potentiality for meaning is always already there in the early Buddhist ethical state of *nibbāna*. But as we will discover, the *Arahant* is no longer concerned with meaning *in* life. The pure potentiality for meaning is always already there in *nibbāna* and for want of a different phrase, the *Arahant* ‘taps into’ this potentiality without accumulating or depleting meaning in any way. The challenge of this idea of meaning is that it has no real western counterpart or concept.

Nibbāna is achieved by a person who follows a path of ethical practices, contemplation and insight. To enter *nibbāna* is to extinguish the flame of desires: desire to possess, and to cling to being and further becoming. It is the elimination of ignorance and the endless change that is the becoming and it is a transition into an ethical state of otherwise than being. This state of otherwise than being produces meaning by releasing the impermanence of existence and the ignorance of meaningful meaning. *Nibbāna* is the peace of rest from the exigencies of becoming.

Said the Buddha:

Monks, when I fully comprehended, as it really is, the satisfaction in the world as such, the misery in the world as such, the escape therefrom as such,—then did I discern the meaning of being enlightened in the world...Then did knowledge and insight arise in me, thus: Sure is my heart’s release. This is my last birth. Now is there no more becoming again.⁵

In *nibbāna*, the *Arahant* is in a state of ‘otherwise than being’, which is a state where being and becoming are no longer an issue for the *Arahant*. In the state of ‘being and becoming’, all living things experience *dukkha* (loosely,

⁴ I will use Pali words e.g. *nibbāna* for the Sanskrit *nirvana*, because from Pali the texts of the Pali Canon were first translated into English.

⁵ The F.W. Woodward Translation of the 2006 Pali Text Society *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, Book 1 Chapter XI. Enlightenment (§§ 101-110) §2.

suffering) which is a state where meaning in life is possible but the pure potentiality of meaning is not available to the unenlightened. It is important to consider meaning in context of *nibbāna* because it puts a new dimension on meaning that Metz does not address in his (FT₃) explanation of fundamentality theory repeated here:

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifices, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue.⁶

Metz suggests that this statement represents a pursuit beyond personal happiness towards that which is worthy to pursue and that which transcends our animal nature into an ethical condition that produces “conditions worthy of great pride or admiration.”⁷ One reason why Metz believes that fundamentality theory is an improvement over other theories is that it includes an active cognitive engagement, a honing of one's skills towards the ethical.⁸ It is not simply doing the ethical thing but reorienting thinking towards the ethical. The ethical state of *nibbāna* is also an active cognitive engagement oriented towards the fundamental conditions of human existence. However it is a state where *dukkha*, and its clinging and craving and attachment has been overcome. While others may have admired the Buddha, he himself would have explained that meaning for him was without the attachment of pride. Instead meaning comes from the defeat of ignorance, attachment, and lack.

Meaning in *nibbāna* is revealed to the person who follows the eightfold path and becomes enlightened. Therefore having more meaning *in* life is no longer an issue for the *Arahant*. Access to the ‘pure potentiality’ of meaning in the ethical state of *nibbāna* means that there is no need and no longer any desire to produce

⁶ Metz, (2013), p. 235.

⁷ Metz, (2013), p. 235.

⁸ Metz, (2013), p. 236.

more meaning because meaning is always already part of the ethical state of *nibbāna*. In the ethical state of *nibbāna*, the *Arahant* does not stop living. In *nibbāna* the *Arahant*'s otherwise than being is always already oriented towards the core of Metz's ethical alignment in (FT₃), "...employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them...".

Therefore, early Buddhism's idea of *nibbāna* is not concerned with meaning *in* life, but is concerned with acting ethically towards all creatures (including the *Arahant*), and not just humans, because in early Buddhism all life is sacred. The *Arahant* does not desire to possess or accumulate meaning because such desire of possession or clinging and craving are the cause of *dukkha* and the *Arahant* has defeated *dukkha*. However, meaning that is derived from ethical action in all endeavors is central to the otherwise than being in the ethical state of *nibbāna*. Following the eightfold path can lead to *nibbāna*. But it is a steep slope and many will not achieve *nibbāna* in this or perhaps many more lifetimes. Is life without *nibbāna* meaningless? No, those who have not been enlightened can live an ethical meaningful existence, but they will not be in a state where the pure potentiality for meaning is available to them. Meaning is attained by those who follow an ethical path, but as long as they desire or covet meaning and become attached to it they will be reborn because they have not yet defeated *dukkha*.⁹ The eightfold path is not unlike Metz's orientation of being towards the ethical act, the ethical response. The 'right ways' of the process orient the aspirant towards: right view, right speech, right doing, right aspiration, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.¹⁰

By limiting my discussion to early Buddhism and not including other Asian-originated belief systems I am subjecting myself to the same critique of universality that Metz has expected to receive, but since Asian thought was left untouched by Metz, perhaps an overview of the early Buddhist canon would be beneficial in understanding how one non-western philosophy (within the scope of early Buddhism) defines meaning and whether this meaning can be subsumed under the banner of fundamentality theory. First, what can we say about meaning in early Buddhism?

⁹ This is why Stephen Collins recommends the term 'aspire to' enlightenment. Collins, (2010), p. 56.

¹⁰ The T. W. Rhys Davids Translation of The Dialogs of the Buddha Volume II, Chapter 14, *The Mahapadana Sutta*, The Sublime Story II, 21 [35].

2. Considering the Idea of Meaning in Early Buddhism

Early Buddhism has no exact phrase for ‘meaning in life’. The process called the eightfold path first espoused by the Buddha leads towards the elimination of *dukkha*, which has been translated into many different English words.

Dukkha has no easily explained meaning in English. As T. W. Rhys Davids explains, English likes to narrowly define words; Pali centers *dukkha* in a much broader spectrum of this aspect of the condition human. *Dukkha* has been explained as suffering, ill, unsatisfactoriness, and lack. But no one of these is a good fit because *dukkha* involves not only the physical but the mental.¹¹ *Dukkha*, Michael C. Brannigan says, is “dislocation” that includes both physical pain and mental anguish.¹² Rhys Davids and others translate *dukkha* into English as ‘ill’ for the texts written for the Pali Text Society at the turn of the twentieth century. Padmasiri de Silva adds, “disharmony, anxiety and unsatisfactoriness” but he cautioned that *dukkha* is not angst.¹³ Sue Hamilton explains that, “...it is important for a proper understanding of *dukkha* means to realise that is being used to make a truth statement and not a value judgment...In particular it is not stating that human experience is unpleasant.”¹⁴ Therefore if *dukkha* is a truth statement assigning the western concept of ‘evil’ to it would not be appropriate. *Dukkha* simply is.

However, central to *dukkha* is the unsatisfactoriness of the clinging, craving and striving for more becoming and more being. The methodology of the eightfold path in early Buddhism is to help the aspirant to find the way to *nibbāna*, or the release of the *āsavas*, the passions (the cankers) and the desires to cling to and possess things, others, self, and being. The aspirant is on a path to defeat *dukkha* which means leaving behind attachments even to desire *nibbāna*. The aim of the eightfold path is to defeat *dukkha*, not to attain (possess) *nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* comes to those who reach *nibbāna*, but if it is coveted by the aspirant this leads only to more *dukkha*. And living the right ways according to the eightfold path is the route towards *nibbāna*. But what is this state called *nibbāna*? Steven Collins explains through the Buddha from the early Pali text,

¹¹ Rhys Davids, (1921-1925), p. 363, *dukkha*. (– NOTE: this is the page and the word reference in the dictionary).

¹² Brannigan, (2010), p. 52.

¹³ de Silva, (1976), p. 20.

¹⁴ Hamilton, (2000), p.13.

Majjhima Nikāya, “...the enlightened person is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable like the great ocean.”¹⁵ Collins also states that “...nirvana is a genuine Existent, not a conceptual one.”¹⁶ While the Buddha cannot articulate for the unenlightened what it is like in the state of *nibbāna* there is a profound sense that it is the end of striving for unsatisfactory things. That it is so full of meaning it could never be explained but that this is a fullness of immeasurable depth and breadth. None of this meaning is possessed it is simply available for the understanding. Collins describes the wisdom of *nibbāna* not as something that is momentary, “Rather, it is supposed to be a continuous form of awareness present throughout any and every activity, achieved by and embodied in the practice of mindfulness.”¹⁷

Metz’s desiderata of beauty for fundamentality theory appeals to deep themes of human experience.¹⁸ For *nibbāna* beauty is not the aesthetic driven by the passions and emotions but the removal of ignorance for the understanding of the world without the experience of *dukkha*. *Nibbāna* is the primordial theme of themes under which beauty, ethics, understanding, and logic can be subsumed.

Early Buddhism has no omnipotent or omniscient God as is expressed by most Western Abrahamic religions. Nor does early Buddhism believe in the separate soul or separate self. T. W. Rhys Davids explains the origin of *anattā* (without soul) in context of Indian thinking and in contrast with the west:

And the original *anattā*, teaching is only a denying of what a man might wrongly hold to be the self—surely a very different thing from denying his reality. Seeking the master among the staff, as I have said elsewhere, you may say to each servant: ‘You are not he!’ without meaning: ‘You have no master.’ I would add here, that it is good to see the translator [F. L. Woodward] rendering the Sankhyan citation *na me attā* (pp. 171, 178) by ‘Not for me (or, to me) is this the self.’ Here is the true Indian way. ‘This is not my soul’ is to talk British.¹⁹

¹⁵ Collins, (1996), p. 163.

¹⁶ Collins, (1996), p. 164.

¹⁷ Collins, (2010), p. 42.

¹⁸ Metz, (2013), pp. 230-231.

¹⁹ The F. L. Woodward translated, *The Book of Gradual Sayings*, Volume II, *The Book of the Fours*, Introduction by T. W. Rhys Davids, p. viii.

While retaining the ontological, ‘human person’s life’, Metz allows for the beginnings of an otherwise than being by orienting human rationality towards the human condition. But is this enough for the Buddha?

Likely not, as G. P. Malalasekera explains:

The passionate sense of egoism is regarded as the root of the world’s unhappiness. For one thing, it makes the individual blind to the reality of other persons. When the notion of self disappears, the notion of ‘mine’ also disappears and one becomes free from the idea of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ (*ahaīkāra-mamaòkāra*), and there follows a gentler, profounder sympathy with all sentient existence.²⁰

I suggest that the Buddha disambiguated meaning from self, ego and I, and situated the pure potentiality for meaning within the ethical state of otherwise than being. The becoming of life is located in impermanence, the impermanence of being and the craving for being. Becoming in the sense of wanting to be reborn into another being is the cause of *dukkha*, the clinging, grasping, craving ultimately for more life. The circle of becoming is the circle of *dukkha*, which many call suffering, but it is also the condition of ignorance, the ignorance of the pure potentiality for meaning. Meaning in the sense of otherwise than being is the cessation of the cycles of becoming because ignorance and craving have been vanquished. This meaning in the state of otherwise than being is a pure meaning in a state of freedom from wants, cares, and existence in *dukkha*. It is a becoming *from* rather than a becoming *into* for it is a freeing *from* the fetters of *taṇhā*, lust for life.²¹ Meaning without ego is the otherwise than being—*nibbāna*. The *Arahant* does not judge meaning, for *nibbāna* is the control of the delusion of the ego which judges by desiring one thing over another.

Any meaning in life for Buddhism is not derived from supernaturalist theories. *Nibbāna*, I will agree with T. W. Rhys Davids, is not a transcendental state, but rather an ethical state.²² *Nibbāna* is a state of otherwise than being.

²⁰ Malalasekera, (1996), p. 11

²¹ T. W. Rhys Davids supplies two meanings to *taṇhā*, first, “tormented by hunger or thirst”, and second, “is a state of mind that leads to rebirth”. Combining the two it is a thirst or a lust for continuing existence—rebirth and to live again. Rhys Davids, (1921-1925), p. 330, *taṇhā*.

²² “*Nibbāna* is purely and solely an ethical state, to be reached in this birth by ethical practices, contemplation and insight. It is therefore not transcendental. Rhys Davids, (1921-1925), p. 405,

Nibbāna is not heaven in the traditional Western sense, but an ethical state and it is achieved while the *Arahant* (enlightened one) lives. *Nibbāna*, it is true, leads one to the end of rebirth but not to death in the traditional sense.

Before one achieves *nibbāna*, becoming is impermanent and *nibbāna* reveals the true nature of deathlessness (*amata*) that is *nibbāna*. Certainly the truth of *dukkha* is not just that life can be painful...life can be joyous...but that life is impermanent and full of change, including the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*) that is the goal of the eightfold path to stop. *Dukkha* isn't evil, or even suffering in much of its manifestation...*dukkha* just is. However, for the Buddha and his followers *dukkha* was something that needed to be overcome.

Metz's fundamentality theory pushes back the animalistic ego and asserts meaning's achievement within an ethical framework positively oriented towards the fundamentals of human existence. Metz is denying neither the self nor satisfaction in the conduct of a life oriented towards positive meaning. But what he has done is to have the ego, the self, and the soul (in context of his first desiderata that there could be, "...relevance of supernatural conditions for meaning in life") first logically consider the consequences of action and act positively towards the fundamental conditions of human existence and even strive to turn around those who would act negatively towards these same conditions.²³ If there is no word for meaning in life in early Buddhism how can we derive from early Buddhist theories of knowledge what meaning might mean? The process of rebirth or *samsāra* is because there is *dukkha*, ultimately the clinging and craving to being itself. But being, becoming and rebirth are what Buddhism ultimately wants to cure. I will explain.

3. What Might Meaning Mean in Early Buddhism?

The Buddha would not deny that the householder (a non-monk) derives

Nibbāna." However, Maurice Walshe disputed this understanding of *nibbāna*, "In fact it is precisely the one and only transcendental element in Buddhism, for which very reason no attempt is made to define it in terms of a personal god, a higher self, or the like. It is ineffable. It can, however, be realised, and its realisation is the aim of the Buddhist practice. (The Maurice Walshe 1997 translation of The Long Discourses of the Buddha, *Dīgha Nikāya* for Wisdom Publication, p. 29, Introduction.) Transcendental without a God is one possible interpretation, but since *nibbāna* does not require anything but earthly practices, I will maintain that for purposes of this exploration of meaning that *nibbāna* is principally an ethical state and it is not tied to supernaturalism or requires any transcendence.

²³ Metz, (2013), p. 232.

some satisfaction from being a householder and is perhaps oblivious that his clinging and craving to things in the world, others, and ultimately to himself causes *dukkha*. The ordinary person experiences happiness, the passions, and sorrow. The condition of life where *dukkha* is a fact of existence can be looked at pessimistically under the general subject of suffering, but it can also be looked at optimistically that life, even with its *dukkha*, provides the opportunity or a means to enlightenment.

The pure potentiality for meaning in early Buddhist thinking I will suggest can be accessed only in the state of *nibbāna* or otherwise than being. In this ethical state that which is necessary to throw off the shackles of *dukkha* has been derived during the process of following the eightfold path. Existence in an ethical state of *nibbāna* means that the *Arahant* is cognizant of the methods necessary to maintain this ethical state even when tempters like the deva (a Buddhist ‘god’) Mara try to dissuade the enlightened one from continuing on the process that is the eightfold path. It is only in *nibbāna*, however, that the *Arahant* becomes aware of and can access the pure potentiality for meaning.

While the householder and others in early Buddhism may conduct themselves ethically, they still have not overcome *dukkha*. They certainly derive meaning from this ethical life and may even through their ethical ways assure themselves a higher rebirth in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, but they have not yet conquered *dukkha*. This is actual meaning which follows, accumulates, or is counterbalanced against unethical acts from rebirth to rebirth. Frank Hoffman explains the *anātman* (no self) in context of living and rebirth as, “continuity without identity of self-same substance.”²⁴ It is only after *dukkha* has been conquered can the enlightened one begin to understand the full meaning of ethical existence and that existence is called *nibbāna*. It is only in this ethical state of otherwise than being that the full meaning of meaning can be accessed. This does not mean that the *Arahant* exists in a state of pure meaning, only that the *Arahant* is in an ethical state where meaning is without the restraint and unsatisfactoriness of *dukkha*, which means that the *Arahant* is in an ethical state where the causes of suffering (*dukkha*) have been eliminated (for the *Arahant*) and where an ethical existence in the purest possible sense is in an otherwise state, a state of otherwise than being. And meaning in *Nibbāna* is no longer meaning *in* life for the *Arahant* because being and becoming are no longer an

²⁴ Hoffman, (1987), p. 53.

issue. This is meaning in a state of otherwise than being. And, as said before, I maintain *nibbāna* is not best understood as a transcendental or a supernatural state but an ethical state. *Arahants* like the Buddha may live for years after becoming enlightened so we cannot say that the Buddha or other *Arahants* exist on another plane, only in an ethical state of otherwise than being.

Admittedly the ethical state of *nibbāna*, the otherwise than being, is a challenge for those steeped in Western philosophy.²⁵ There is nothing quite like it in traditional Western thinking because most enlightened states such as living sainthood and other aspects of the purely ethical life have overtones of supernaturalism that early Buddhism does not espouse. Collins paraphrases Wittgenstein's last proposition in his *Tractatus* in relationship to *nibbāna*, "What you can't say about nirvana you can't say, and you can't picture it by means of imagery either." He follows with, "Inexpressible, timeless nirvana is a moment in the Buddhist textualization of time, the explicit or implicit closer marker in its discourse of felicity. It is the motionless and ungraspable horizon, the limit-condition that makes of the Pali imaginaire a coherent whole."²⁶ What the outsider (unenlightened) cannot know about *nibbāna* is greater than what the outsider can know.

Metz's fundamentality theory (FT₃) strives, like the acolyte on the early Buddhist eightfold path, towards a life of meaning by being negatively oriented towards that which is not desirable in the fundamental conditions of human existence (*dukkha*) and being positively oriented towards the fundamental conditions of human existence. In Buddhism the culmination of this reorientation is *nibbāna*. The eightfold path requires a person to be mindful, wise, and act ethically. Fundamentality theory emphasizes cognitive reorientation (mindfulness), logical decision making (wisdom), and positive orientation to the fundamentals of human existence (ethical thoughts; ethical acts). In this both theories appear to agree.

The process of the eightfold path eschews and sheds practices that produce *dukkha*, substituting them with different practices, behaviors, and thinking that are towards the ethical state in *nibbāna* where being and becoming are no longer

²⁵ Of course, Emmanuel Levinas uses the term "otherwise than being" in context of his ethics of responsibility to the other. However, no state change like *nibbāna* is contemplated by Levinas, even though his idea of putting the metaphysical before the ontological could make one think he is going in that direction.

²⁶ Collins, (2010), p. 185. Wittgenstein's last proposition is, "Whereof one cannot speak, therefore one must be silent." Wittgenstein, (1922), Proposition 7.

an issue for the *Arahant* because *dukkha* has been defeated and the cycle of *samsāra* or rebirth has been severed.

Meaning, in the form of acting ethically while following the eightfold path towards enlightenment, produces meaning along the way. The householder, as has been explained, also achieves meaning in life by living ethically. Even if the individual dies before becoming enlightened, living ethically is quite often rewarded by rebirth into a higher state. In other words, meaning is carried forward in the cycle of *samsāra*. At the same time ethical lapses are black marks or ('anti-matter'²⁷ as Metz calls it) which are part of the balance that is carried forward into the rebirth cycle. In one lifetime ethical living may propel the person to a higher form of rebirth, but ethical lapses may push the person to a lesser form of existence in the next cycle of rebirth.

But since there is no separate self and no soul, what carries forward from rebirth to rebirth? This is Hoffman's continuity without identity of self-same substance. And we know from the earliest chroniclers of the Buddha that he could remember his past lives in sufficient enough detail to derive meaning from these lives in relationship to his own enlightenment.

There is never a part-whole distinction for meaning in early Buddhist thinking. If meaning were derived only by being in the state of *nibbāna*, then only in *nibbāna* could there be any meaning. In the west we might say, then, that only the saint could have achieved meaning in life because he/she lived a life devoted to the path towards sainthood. The Buddha sees meaning in a householder's life as well as the *Arahant* in *nibbāna*.

He says:

O priests, if anyone says that a man *must* reap according to his deeds, in that case there is no religious life, nor is there any opportunity afforded for the entire extinction of misery. But if anyone says that the reward a man reaps accords with his deeds, in that case there is a religious life, and opportunity is afforded for the entire extinction of misery.²⁸

Certainly there is a Buddhist hell for those whose practices are anti-ethical in the extreme. However, this is not a permanent state either, for there is always possibility for achieving enlightenment in some future life, though it may take

²⁷ Metz, (2013), p. 64.

²⁸ Ross, (1952), p. 106.

much longer and many more cycles of rebirth as a result. Meaning is not lost in *samsāra*; it is accumulated but can also be counterbalanced by actions that Metz calls ‘anti-matter’ and for which the Buddha might have called conditions which maintain or produce *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is a fact and itself is not anti-matter, but actions that Metz calls anti-matter can continue the condition called *dukkha*.

The householder was not scorned, but celebrated by the Buddha. There is every much the need for householders as there are monks in society. However, this does not mean that the householder will escape *dukkha*. This means that the householder can obtain meaning in life by living an ethical life, but will not achieve the ethical state of *nibbāna* without engaging the rigors of the eightfold path and conquering *dukkha*.

By way of summarizing the discussion so far, I want reiterate that early Buddhism does not embrace supernaturalism as the foundation for meaning in life. The Buddha thought that all life, human or otherwise was sacred and that meaning in life can be obtained through ethical practices. This meaning cumulates but can be offset by non-ethical practices (anti-matter) anytime during the cycle of rebirth, *samsāra*. However, and this is something that is not explored in Metz’s fundamentality theory, there is an ethical state called *nibbāna* that can be achieved (no one is precluded) by anyone and where the pure potentiality for meaning is available. But while the *Arahant* who achieves *nibbāna* is still living, being and becoming is no longer an issue. Therefore the ethical state of *nibbāna* is in a state of otherwise than being. This state of otherwise than being is not outside of existence (the extra-physical), because the *Arahant* still lives in this world, but this is a person who has shorn the shackles of the need for being and becoming and has ended for himself/herself the unsatisfactory desire for rebirth.

Finally, what are the dimensions of *nibbāna*? Floyd Ross explains that the ethical and psychological comprise one dimension and the metaphysical the second. He said:

Liberation from resentment, coveting, lusting constitutes the ethical factor in *Nirvana*. Expressed psychologically, it involves relinquishing all sense of the ‘I’. The metaphysical dimension refers to the cessation of Becoming and of ignorance. This cessation of Becoming is the supreme goal sought; the extinction of craving is merely a steppingstone to this.²⁹

²⁹ Ross, (1952), p. 116. I concur with Ross but with the rejection of the term goal which is an attachment term. Becoming simply ceases to be upon enlightenment. One cannot desire this or one

4. Meaning in Nibbāna

Nibbāna is not a state where one has accumulated so much meaning; one enters it not as someone who has for years paid down a debt to finally achieve full ownership. Enlightenment, while it comes from the process of living the eightfold path, is not something that is the same for everyone. *Nibbāna* is not achieved after filling the bucket full of meaning. For some, enlightenment may come quickly; for others, it may take many more cycles of *samsāra*. While meaning accumulates in the state of being and becoming, in the state of otherwise than being it does not because the ethical state of *nibbāna* is the state where the pure potentiality for meaning is always already available to *Arahant*. However, this does not mean that the *Arahant* will ever actualize the full potentiality of meaning.

In early Buddhism there is no shortage of ‘good’ meaning for anyone who lives ethically and performs ethical deeds. However, until *dukkha* can be defeated by following the eightfold path and achieving *nibbāna*, even the ethical person will probably be reborn. Good meaning and Metz’s anti-matter accrued during life is accumulated and balanced, sending the reborn into a higher or lower rebirth. The person who follows the eightfold path and achieves the ethical state called *nibbāna* has not accumulated more good meaning than anyone else, because the amount of good meaning one has accumulated is not tied to achieving enlightenment. One can throw off the shackles of *dukkha* even if the accumulation of anti-matter from this life and previous rebirths is higher than the total of good meaning. However, once in the ethical state of *nibbāna*, rather than accumulate more meaning, the *Arahant* is in a state where the pure potentiality for meaning can be ‘tapped into’. Nor is this a state where the *Arahant* would want to or need to accumulate meaning because attachment to, cumulating or possessing meaning, like the possession of being and becoming would only serve to produce *dukkha*...and the *Arahant* has been successful in defeating *dukkha*.

will continue in the cycle of *samsāra*.

5. The Dilemma of *Parinibbāna*

The living *Arahant*, as the Buddha describes, is like the charcoal log that could burn again as “having fuel remaining.” “While the *Arahant* is still alive, he/she still experiences the process of the five aggregates, but they do not burn with the fires of passion, aversion, or delusion. When the *Arahant* passes away, there is no longer any experience of aggregates here or anywhere else.”³⁰ Few *Arahants* die at the moment of their enlightenment, and the Buddha was not in favor of suicide upon the achievement of enlightenment.

However, there is a state to which the *Arahant* passes, and that is the state of *Parinibbāna*. The *Arahant* is already in an ethical state, a state of otherwise than being where being and becoming are no longer an issue. The cycle of rebirth has been severed, so the *Arahant* will not be reborn. However, there is no separate soul in Buddhism, which means no soul, metaphysical or otherwise, can be passed into the state called *Parinibbāna*. In life there is no ‘I’ but we are the process called the five aggregates (the *khandhas*) they include material form *rūpa*, feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), dispositions or coefficients of consciousness (*sankhārā*), and cognition or consciousness (*viññāṇa*). The five aggregates never coalesce into a whole because they form the process that is our becoming. The *Arahant* severs being, becoming, and rebirth when entering *nibbāna*. What happens to the *Arahant* after there is no more rebirth (*amata* or deathlessness)? The Buddha would not speculate as to what happens to the *Arahant* after the final passing. Why? There are no processes of the *khandhas* after the *Arahant* passes away which means no one can report what the state of *Parinibbāna* is like. The Buddha refused to speculate about what he could not know or understand from experience or through empirical evidence. Can we ascribe a meaning to the meaning for the otherwise than being, *nibbāna* and *Parinibbāna*? Even the Buddha backed away from this idea.

T.W. Rhys Davids explains:

Unspeakable, of that for which in the Buddha’s own saying there is no word, which cannot be grasped in terms of reasoning and cool logic, the Nameless, Undefinable (cp. the simile of extinction of the flame which may be said to pass from a visible state into a state which cannot be

³⁰ Note 1, §44, p.29, from the Thanissaro Bhikkhu translation of the *Itivuttaka* in the chapter, The Group of Twos.

defined. Thus the Saint (Arahant) passes into that same state, for which there is ‘no measure’ (i.e. no dimension)).³¹

Is Parinibbāna heaven? Not in the sense of mainstream Abrahamic religions. Heaven with these mainstream Western religions is associated with the omniscient and omnipotent God. For early Buddhism, the karmic forces of the universe are always already present, so the question early Buddhism asks is whether these self-same forces would also be present in *Parinibbāna* but in an ethical state that is the continuation of *nibbāna* after the *Arahant*’s final rebirth into deathlessness (*amata*). In the end, the Buddha did not explain this mystery.

6. What Challenges Does Early Buddhism Offer Fundamentality Theory?

We can seek to undermine the early Buddhist ideas of rebirth, enlightenment, and the state of otherwise than being after the last rebirth of the *Arahant* called *Parinibbāna* as not being helpful towards a theory of meaning in life, or we can reconsider fundamentality theory in light of early Buddhist thinking.

I believe that Metz’s fundamentality theory as expressed in (FT₃) generally applies to early Buddhist thinking. However, because the ethical state of *nibbāna* is something that can be achieved by the living and in this state one has access to the pure potentiality of meaning, the definition (FT₃) may be inadequate to describe what meaning means to the *Arahant*. As I have explained before, *nibbāna* is not a state of pure meaning but it is the ethical state where the *Arahant* can avail himself/herself of the pure potentiality for meaning. Those not in this ethical state can strive for more and more meaning but cannot avail themselves of the pure potentiality for meaning without becoming enlightened. I submit along with Metz, there is no question that the ethical person in early Buddhist thinking who is *not* an *Arahant* will obtain meaning in life as expressed by (FT₃). And in early Buddhist thinking this meaning will not be lost when an unenlightened person dies. The continuity without identity of self-same substance aspect of the early Buddhist theory of knowledge explains that this is possible.

But we have no real equivalent in Western thinking of an ethical state quite like *nibbāna*. Certainly there are saints and persons like Mother Theresa who

³¹ Rhys Davids, (1921-1925), p. 405, *Nibbāna*.

lived their lives in ethical ways beyond what most would aspire to or even consider possible or desirable. The difference between the Buddhist *Arahant* and the Christian saint, for example, is that early Buddhism does not ascribe to a purpose theory in which an omniscient and omnipotent God creates all of, or in part, an objective moral system. Nor in early Buddhism does anyone have a soul that can enter such a place as heaven or hell. In *nibbāna* the *Arahant* has shed the *āsavas*, the cankers, and when the *Arahant* enters *Parinibbāna* the five aggregates (*khandhas*) no longer function. However the Buddha did not believe that there was nothingness in *Parinibbāna*. While the Buddha could not explain what of the *Arahant* went into *Parinibbāna*, Hoffman's 'continuity without identity of self-same substance' conveys the general idea.

Early Buddhism affirms that anyone can harness the karmic forces of the universe by following the eightfold path towards *nibbāna*. In early Buddhist thinking, one does not have to have an omniscient or omnipotent God to effect the karmic forces. These forces simply are. Belief in a God is not necessary for *nibbāna* to be achieved. This is not all that different from the arguments Metz has made with his first desideratum, "An attractive theory of meaning in life ought to account for the respect in which supernatural conditions could add meaning, even if they are not necessary for it."³² While mysterious, *Nibbāna* is not a supernatural condition; it is an ethical state, a state that any living person can aspire to.³³

Early Buddhist karma (*kamma* in Pali but I will use 'karma' going forward) says that acts produce consequences for the living and for the living's prospects for rebirth: karma is moral causation and the result is called *vipāka*. Thus we might surmise that there is both good karmic act and bad karmic act.

Within Metz's definition of meaning, if I prize it, a bad act could be meaningful. Metz explains that in part meaning is "...something that is worthy for its own sake, something that provides a person with at least some (*pro tanto*) basic reason to prize it."³⁴ But this is only part of the equation because Metz further requires that meaning in life have an ethical component. With this I

³² Metz, (2013), p. 220.

³³ The Mahayana branch of Buddhism says that any sentient being can aspire to whether bug, slug, or human. This idea called 'Buddha nature' is beyond the scope of this paper because the idea was conceived long after the chronicles of early Buddhism in the Theravada tradition were written. However, if all sentient beings can become enlightened can they also obtain meaning in life like humans? This question requires additional consideration and likely would be a good subject for a subsequent discussion and paper.

³⁴ Metz, (2013), p. 4, emphasis in original.

believe the Buddha would agree. The pure potentiality for meaning becomes apparent to the *Arahant* only after years (and perhaps countless rebirths) of acts and thoughts that are inherently good—ethical. The act or thought that is bad carries with it bad karma (similar to Metz’s anti-matter) which quite often perpetuates *dukkha* and leads one down the path towards rebirth. The Buddha did not believe that letting others suffer would make them stronger. Rather he used his pedagogical powers to help monks and others overcome the hurdles they faced along the eightfold path. But he would not always be there which is why his eightfold path was carefully explained and taught.

In a traditional story the murdering robber Angulimala confronts the Buddha alone on the road. Angulimala asks the Buddha questions and the Buddha explains to him how the robber’s bad deeds today will haunt him through many more rebirths.³⁵ Angulimala right then and there asks to follow the Buddha and the Buddha welcomes him.

Karma is action; however it is we who judge the value of meaning produced by any action whether its consequence is good or bad. For example, does the action produce *dukkha*? Can we always know? Karma gives no easy answers to its understanding because the consequences of two nearly identical acts by two different persons may be different.³⁶ The fatty meal eaten by a glutton who does not take care of himself may have far greater consequences than the same meal eaten by one who lives a more wholesome life. Then again the consequence may be insignificant in this lifetime but be significant in a future rebirth. A lot depends upon three factors: “...merit acquired in the past...life in appropriate surroundings...proper resolve or application.”³⁷ Karma in and of itself is not meaning, but it is “one of the contributing factors in the human personality.”³⁸ It is the *Arahant* who discovers the pure potentiality for meaning because he/she has defeated ignorance (*avijja*) and *dukkha*. The pure potentiality for meaning lies in the understanding which is *nibbāna*. This may have taken the *Arahant* many rebirths, so we must remember that “I” may be understood as “continuity without identity of self-same substance.”

³⁵ D. J. I. Kalupahana, (1982), p. 182.

³⁶ D. J. Kalupahana, (1976), p. 45.

³⁷ D. J. Kalupahana, (1976), p. 50.

³⁸ D. J. Kalupahana, (1976), p. 51.

7. Is There a Buddhist Fundamentality Theory?

It would not be appropriate to suggest that there is another fundamentality theory we might call Buddhist fundamentality theory. There are so many branches of Buddhism that no one theory of meaning could encompass all. What I am suggesting is that if there is an ethical state called *nibbāna* that can be aspired to by anyone, and in that ethical state the pure potentiality for meaning is available to the *Arahant*, then there is more to meaning in early Buddhism than what has been expressed in Metz's (FT₃). Nor am I saying that (FT₃) could not accommodate the pure potentiality for meaning in *nibbāna*, but because Metz's orientation to meaning theory is strictly through the English language and classic European thinking, where Eastern ideas such as *nibbāna* are not considered in his fundamentality theory.

Early Buddhism is more than just a religion. The Buddha formulated the eightfold path from his own experience towards achieving enlightenment. He saw that *nibbāna* was possible through the process called the eightfold path (right view, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration) and that within that process there are three aspects of the otherwise than being that are essential to achieve ethical state: mindfulness, wisdom, and ethical action. *Nibbāna* is not an ethical state where the *Arahant* becomes separate from humanity. The island the Buddha speaks (as written by early chroniclers because the Buddha wrote nothing down) about in the *Dhammapada* is an island against the temptations of the *āsavas*, and the deva Māra who try to sway the *Arahant* away from the eightfold path and *nibbāna*. Said the Buddha, "By rousing himself, by earnestness, by restraint and control, the wise man may make for himself an island which no flood can overwhelm."³⁹ The Buddha was not saying become a hermit or recluse, but construct impenetrable barriers against the temptations and flaming passions. The *Arahant* practices mindfulness and meditation, reasons and acts in an ethical manner, and puts knowledge before faith. The Buddha put knowledge before faith (*saddhā*) because faith can sometimes be blind to knowledge. Knowledge is asserted by the experience of it by the individual who experiences the knowledge. If one does not experience and yet believes, one is acting in faith. Faith without knowledge and verification leads to the taking for granted of ideas

³⁹ The 2000 F. Max Muller translation of the Wisdom of the Buddha, *the Dhammapada*, Dover Publications, Mineola, N.Y., Chapter II On Earnestness, Location 91, Kindle Edition.

that could be falsehoods.

8. The Dimension of Meaning in Early Buddhism

For the most part I find little to quibble with in Metz's nine desiderata for his fundamentality theory in relationship to early Buddhist thinking.⁴⁰ However desiderata number four, 'good consequences' deserves some additional attention in context of early Buddhist thinking.

Damien Keown explains that Buddhism is not utilitarian because it "does not define the right separate from the good," and "for Buddhism acts have bad consequences because they are bad acts, they are not bad acts because they have bad consequences as a utilitarian would maintain."⁴¹ What precedes the act, the motive, determines whether it is a rightful act. Therefore intentionally stomping a bug would not be a rightful act, but the accidental stepping on a bug while otherwise in the performance of rightful acts could be a rightful act. There are, however, branches of modern Buddhism where any denial of any living other's becoming is avoided in the extreme. Therefore early Buddhism would probably replace the word 'consequences' with 'acts' in the fundamentality discussion.

My objection with 'good consequences' in connection with early Buddhist thinking is with the term only. Metz is vociferous like the Buddha that it is the thinking, the logic of the agent in part that produces meaning. Metz says:

Meaning depends, in part, on whether the agent: promotes well-being in others in morally permissible ways, promotes well-being in others in ways that robustly involve her agency and effort; reflects excellence in relation to herself, and is subjectively attracted to what she is doing.⁴²

What is at the core of the similarities between Metz's fundamentality theory of meaning in life and early Buddhism's ideas is that in early Buddhism there is meaning *in* life for all who are not enlightened and this cumulates or is devalued by living the lives of being and becoming during the cycle of rebirth or *samsāra*. It is not until one becomes enlightened that one discovers that the pure potential

⁴⁰ Metz, (2013), pp. 220-222. Desiderata include: 1) spiritual realm, 2) subjective conditions, 3) negative conditions, 4) good consequences, 5) moral constraints, 6) agent-relativity, 7) internal and external, 8) deliberation and decision, and 9) object of rationality.

⁴¹ Keown, (1992, 2001), pp. 177-178.

⁴² Metz, (2013), p. 198.

for meaning is available in the otherwise than being in the ethical state called *nibbāna*. But the difference between Metz's fundamentality theory and early Buddhist thinking is that in this ethical state of otherwise than being, 'meaning in life' is no longer an issue, and its measurement, and accumulation, is no longer an issue for the *Arahant* because the accumulation of anything, including meaning, is a cause of *dukkha*. *Dukkha* has been defeated by the *Arahant*. The *Arahant* would not desire or seek to ascertain whether one person has more meaning than another in the state of being and becoming or in the state of otherwise than being. The accumulation of meaning is simply not an issue for the enlightened one.

The Buddha was an *Arahant*, and there presumably have been many others who have achieved *nibbāna*. The Buddha, by all accounts, was an extraordinary person whose legacy and teachings have outlived his final rebirth. But is the Buddha's meaning greater than most others? I maintain that this is not the case. The Buddha was a great teacher who strode an ethical path after enlightenment and encouraged many others to follow his footsteps into enlightenment. Even as he began to see and feel his own death coming, he resisted the idea of appointing an ontological successor. Instead he passed (presumably) into *Parinibbāna* and deathlessness without asking others to assess or measure his own meaning. One *Arahant* has no more meaning than another. What is possible is that the *Arahant* who lives longer as an *Arahant* could help to produce more meaning for others along the way. However there is no formula for this because there are some *Arahants* like the Buddha who will be better teachers than others.

There is no more meaning to be accumulated for an enlightened one. All enlightened are always already in a state where the pure potentiality for meaning is available for the understanding and use by the *Arahant* in the process of continuing along the eightfold path, employing Metz's "...reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them..."

Certainly, like the Buddha, any *Arahant* may live a long life of ethical service to the world, live long in mindful meditation, and amass great knowledge and wisdom about the karmic forces. This, fundamentality theory would measure as meaning in life. However, what is fundamentally different in early Buddhist thinking is that the *Arahant* is in a state of otherwise than being where such measuring of 'meaning in life' is no longer an issue and in fact has been defeated because such accumulation even of the good, true and beautiful, is

a cause of *dukkha*. As a result *Arahant* (A)'s otherwise than being in *nibbāna* is no more meaningful than *Arahant* (B)'s. We can speak of this or that person and his or her deeds before becoming and debate who had produced the greater number of good deeds before becoming an *Arahant*. But the *Arahant* is no longer concerned with his or her own meaning derived from the ethical state of *nibbāna*, only in acting in ways that produce meaning for others.

I do not see early Buddhist thinking about meaning imperiling fundamentality theory. Those who continue to exist in the cycle of *saṃsāra* will continue to do so because they desire being and becoming, and the accumulation of even meaning, all of which cause *dukkha*. What I suggest is that meaning itself, when considered through the lens of early Buddhism, has an additional dimension that is not concerned with measurement. That the pure potentiality for meaning that the *Arahant* can access in the otherwise than being of *nibbāna* is just that, pure and without measure. With early Buddhist thinking I maintain that this meaning in the ethical state of deathlessness is something that all can obtain by following the eightfold path and eschewing that which produces *dukkha*. Meaning without ego means that meaning without *dukkha* is possible and that is the most wondrous idea of meaning of all.

However, I conclude with Metz that meaning in early Buddhism is not the last word on meaning or meaning theory because early Buddhism adds only one of possibly many more dimensions to the complicated conversation that is meaning.

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**Note: Please see footnotes for references to the early Buddhist texts.*

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