

‘Life is Meaningless.’ Compared to What?

Damian Veal*

Abstract

James Tartaglia argues that the question of the meaning of life, when properly construed, is ‘the keystone of philosophy,’ that which ‘locks its traditional preoccupations in place’ and ‘allows them to bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science.’ He also argues that we ought to reject the question’s premise and conclude that ‘life is meaningless.’ This paper critically examines what Tartaglia calls ‘the real question of the meaning of life’ and its implications. It concludes that Tartaglia provides no good reasons for maintaining that his version of the question is not, in the words of his imaginary interlocutor, ‘a philosophical dead-end,’ but that there is a broader sense of the question that might indeed qualify as a fundamental wellspring of philosophical inquiry.

Introduction

James Tartaglia’s *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality* is a work of rare philosophical ambition.¹ Deeming the ‘big ideas’ and ‘sweeping visions’ of the great systematic metaphysicians of the past to be both more interesting and more ‘philosophical’ than the modest, piecemeal efforts of his contemporaries, Tartaglia has self-consciously set out to emulate the former. Mercifully lacking the overweening grandiosity of some of those past greats who seem to have inspired him, however, Tartaglia is modest enough to admit that he ‘may well not have succeeded.’² Also happily absent is the kind of tortuous, circumlocutory prose for which some of those same luminaries are notorious: Tartaglia’s book is elegantly written and clearly argued throughout. And for those who may fear that, in purporting to offer a ‘system’—‘A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality,’ no less—the book might test the limits of both their patience and their shelving capacity, it should be noted that its soaring ambition is by no means reflected in its bulk, weighing in as it does at a svelte two-hundred pages.

Given the audacious scope of Tartaglia’s book, comprising rich discussions

* Independent Researcher. Email: damian.veal[a]gmail.com.

¹ Tartaglia (2016).

² Ibid., p. ix.

and provocative claims about everything from the nature of philosophy and the meaning of life to the problems of consciousness, time, and universals—and, far more audaciously still, claiming to have provided the keys to solving all of these problems in a mere two-hundred pages—Tartaglia leaves himself unusually wide open to criticism. But if a fair test of the worth of a work of philosophy is not how much consensus it generates—something that rarely ever happens in philosophy anyway—but rather how much rich philosophical debate it provokes, I expect *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* will prove itself worthy indeed. Regarding my own contribution to the anticipated debates, I expect the present paper to be only my opening salvo. Given the theme of the present symposium—namely, ‘Nihilism and the Meaning of Life’—I limit myself here to addressing Tartaglia’s principal claims regarding these two issues.

1. Theme and Outline of the Paper

That the human species has no ‘overall meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ that it does not owe its existence to some ‘transcendent’ being ‘beyond the physical universe,’ is not a claim that is likely to raise many eyebrows, much less hackles, in contemporary academia. From the point of view of modern science, informed by the findings of cosmology, geology and evolutionary biology, to ask what the human species is *for*, to ask what its *meaning* or *purpose* might be, is every bit as absurd as asking after the ‘meaning’ of electricity or the ‘purpose’ of a planet. What are penguins for? What is the overall meaning of hippopotamuses? What was the point of dinosaurs? If the question of the ‘overall meaning’ of the human species strikes you as any less preposterous than these questions about penguins, hippos and dinosaurs, then—from the point of view of modern science, at least—you have a whole lot of catching up to do.

It is because academics are rationally obliged to take our best established knowledge of the world seriously that few are nowadays inclined to regard such questions as good or even meaningful ones. While it makes sense to talk about the meaning of a sentence or a gesture, about the purpose of an artefact or an action, and about the ‘overall meaning’ of a fable or narrative, we have long since known that biological species are not the sorts of things that *could* have ‘overall meanings’ or purposes.³ While we can understand, in psychological and

³ For accessible yet sophisticated introductions to the issues see, e.g., Kitcher (1982), Dawkins (1991), and Dennett (1995).

evolutionary terms, why human beings might have a natural tendency to suppose there must be some inscrutable ‘meaning’ to their existence—just as we can explain their natural tendency to assume purpose, design, intention and meaning lurking behind natural disasters, personal misfortunes, and the appearance of rainbows or comets⁴—no one who is even moderately well-acquainted with the findings of the past two centuries of science may take such assumptions as their own; not, at any rate, with a clear intellectual conscience.

It is for reasons such as these, I take it, that those few philosophers who have waded into the murky and mercurial waters of the question of ‘the meaning of life’ in recent decades, while not neglecting to discuss and critically evaluate traditional theistic approaches to the question, have also not *restricted themselves* to such approaches. This strikes me as both eminently reasonable and just what one would expect. Given the prevalence of theistic and otherwise supernaturalist beliefs throughout world history and across human societies, one would not expect philosophers to neglect them entirely. By the same token, however, one would also not expect them to adopt the assumptions of such metaphysics as their own—even if a small number of them may be attracted to the question in the first place precisely because they *do* share some such assumptions. After all, if theistic or supernaturalist assumptions were to delimit the parameters of the inquiry, such that the only permissible construal of the question of life’s meaning, or of the conditions of a meaningful life, would have to invoke some divine purpose or supernatural, meaning-bestowing context, this would very obviously rule out any and all possible *naturalist* approaches to meaning, significance and value a priori. Since we do not ordinarily permit the parameters of our intellectual inquiries to be dictated by the default assumptions of medieval scholasticism—not, at any rate, those of us who conduct our inquiries outside the cloistered confines of seminaries and theology departments—why would we do so here?

Now, although these remarks ought to be uncontroversial—after all, there are no approaches being ruled out a priori here—it turns out that not all philosophers agree that this is a reasonable way to proceed. More specifically, as those who have read this journal’s recent symposium on Thaddeus Metz’s book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*⁵ will be aware, James Tartaglia is one

⁴ See, e.g., Gergely & Csibra (2003), Guthrie (1993); Kelemen (1999, 2004), Kelemen & DiYanni (2005), Kelemen & Rosset (2009), McCauley (2000, 2011), Pyysiainen (2009), and Tremplin (2010).

⁵ Metz (2013). For the complete symposium see Morioka (2015).

philosopher who is not happy about it at all; indeed, he seems to be positively fuming about it. What Tartaglia is most incensed about, it seems, is that what he calls a ‘new paradigm’ within analytic philosophy, a paradigm ostensibly devoted to exploring the question of ‘the meaning of life,’ entirely neglects what he calls the *traditional* question of the meaning of life.⁶ And the traditional question of life’s meaning, Tartaglia insists, is not only the sole *real* question, the only obviously and legitimately *philosophical* question of life’s meaning; it is also nothing less than *the* fundamental question of philosophy.

In what follows I critically explore Tartaglia’s arguments for these claims as presented in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. In section 2 I introduce what Tartaglia calls ‘the real question of the meaning of life’ and indicate some of the reasons for his exasperation with the ‘new paradigm’ approach. In section 3 I address Tartaglia’s claim that there is only one ‘obvious philosophical question in the area’ before clarifying just what this ‘real’ question of the meaning of life boils down to. In section 4 I evaluate Tartaglia’s reasons for claiming that this question is not only ‘as serious as your life’ but also ‘the keystone of philosophy.’ In other words, why does he think it matters so much? Having failed to arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question in section 4, I return to it in section 5 and suggest that an adequate answer must take into account the principal metaphysical thesis Tartaglia presents in the second half of the book—namely, what he calls his ‘Transcendent Hypothesis.’ In the conclusion I suggest that, although Tartaglia’s ‘real’ question of the meaning of life ought to be abandoned, there is yet a broader sense of the question that might indeed qualify as one of the fundamental wellsprings of philosophical inquiry.

2. The ‘Real’ Question of the Meaning of Life

In order to get a handle on what Tartaglia calls the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, one need only reflect on the fact that he would regard the opening two paragraphs of section 1 above as an outright *denigration* of this question.⁷ Indeed, in view of all he has said on this issue—not only in the book presently under discussion, but also in several recently published papers devoted to the same topic⁸—it is safe to say that he would regard these paragraphs as the

⁶ Tartaglia (2015).

⁷ Tartaglia (2015), p. 92; (2015a).

⁸ Tartaglia (2015a, 2016a, 2016b).

very epitome of what he characterises as a pernicious ‘anti-philosophical cultural trend,’ a ‘conspicuous tragicomic’ element of which has been ‘the phenomenon of philosophers turning against philosophy.’ According to Tartaglia this *prima facie* ‘absurd agenda’ has been ‘a dominant theme within the profession since the 19th century,’ with the most influential versions of it attempting to ‘make philosophy more like science.’⁹

What Tartaglia takes to be the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, then, is precisely the question I have suggested most academics would nowadays regard as being based upon obsolete, prescientific assumptions: namely, the question of whether or not the human species has an ‘overall purpose’ or ‘overall meaning.’ Thus, in his unsparingly critical review of Metz’s *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Approach*, Tartaglia suggests that the book goes awry right from the start by *addressing itself to the wrong issue*. While one might think that what Metz’s book ought to be about should be a matter for Metz to decide, Tartaglia’s implicit assumption seems to be that the book ought not to have been published at all—not if it has any pretensions to be a genuine work of *philosophy*, at any rate.¹⁰ Seizing upon a passage from Metz’s Introduction in which he clarifies the scope of the book, Tartaglia suggests that the very fact that it does not address itself to the question of *whether the human species has a meaning* already demonstrates that ‘something has gone wrong.’ This is because, according to Tartaglia, to ask the question of the meaning of life just *is* to ask ‘whether the human species has a meaning.’¹¹ Metz’s book, on the other hand, since it sets out from the assumption that what ‘[m]ost people, or at least philosophers, interested in topics readily placed under the rubric of “the meaning of life” ultimately want to know [is] what, if anything, would confer meaning on their own lives and the lives of those people for whom they care,’¹² thereby disqualifies itself as a genuine work of philosophy from the outset.

Were it the case that in rebuking other approaches as ‘not really philosophical,’ Tartaglia were simply expressing the kind of haughty disdain that Continental and analytic philosophers sometimes display towards one another, this would hardly merit comment. However, while I do think it’s possible to detect a tone of proprietorial superciliousness in the way Tartaglia discusses the

⁹ Tartaglia 2016, pp. 1, 185 n. 3.

¹⁰ Metz explicitly notes this implication of Tartaglia’s critique in his reply (Metz 2015, p. 230).

¹¹ Tartaglia (2015), p. 94.

¹² Metz (2013), p. 3; Tartaglia (2015), p. 95; Metz (2015), p. 230.

work of other philosophers—something most audible when, for example, he suggests that those who take a different approach to the question of life’s meaning than his own do so ‘because they are very confused’¹³—such an attitude should also be understood in the context of the principal metaphilosophical thesis of Tartaglia’s book. For according to *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*, the question of the meaning of life—understood as the question of whether there might be an ‘overall meaning’ to human existence—is *the* philosophical question par excellence. Indeed, according to Tartaglia it is nothing less than the original, paradigmatic philosophical question; the question in which all of philosophy’s perennial problems are rooted; which unifies all of its disparate concerns; and which motivates people to take an interest in it in the first place. As such, Tartaglia argues, philosophers should openly embrace the question as their core subject matter and special areas of expertise.¹⁴

Should philosophers overcome their misguided sense of embarrassment over this question and reclaim it for philosophy, suggests Tartaglia, it would have many salutary consequences: it would reinvigorate philosophy by explicitly reconnecting it with its roots in matters of natural human concern; it would make sense of and justify the fact that there is a discipline called philosophy at all, by clarifying ‘what it is all about’; it would illuminate the history of philosophy and clarify what unites its diverse concerns by revealing the underlying connection between its theoretical and practical branches; it would help to restore philosophy’s self-confidence in an age dominated by aggressive scientism; it would provide a clear line of demarcation between science and philosophy, so that philosophy can thrive in peace, and science, in gaining clarity about its own proper remit, can learn to ‘mind its own business’;¹⁵ and it would restore philosophy’s unique cultural voice by showing that science is not the only legitimate mode of discourse about the nature of reality—philosophy, he suspects, can more than hold its own on this score.¹⁶

Not least among the startling implications of Tartaglia’s thesis here is that, contrary to what one would expect, it is not contemporary *philosophers* who

¹³ Tartaglia (2015), p. 4.

¹⁴ Tartaglia (2016), chapter 3 *passim* and Tartaglia (2016a).

¹⁵ Tartaglia (2016), p. 76.

¹⁶ Although Tartaglia writes ‘at least’ rather than ‘more than’ (ibid., p. 11), it becomes clear later in the book that he thinks scientists not only cannot but *should not try* to address questions regarding ‘the nature of reality,’ for this is the special domain of expertise of the philosopher qua a priori metaphysician (see chapter 8 especially).

best understand the true nature of philosophy, but rather those members of the general public who, while they may know nothing whatsoever about what such philosophers spend their lives thinking, talking and writing about, at least understand something that these philosophers themselves appear not to: namely, that the core subject matter of philosophy—that which defines it *as* philosophy—is nothing other than *the meaning of life*.

Were Tartaglia right about this it would be a surprising states of affairs indeed. Could it really be the case that people who may have never read a work of philosophy, and who might not be able to name more than a few famous philosophers (and almost certainly none who are still alive), might nevertheless understand the nature and motivating concerns of philosophy better than philosophers themselves? Could it be the case that philosophers, of all people, are so thoroughly bereft of self-knowledge that they have no real understanding of what it is they devote their lives to, or why they are doing it, whereas people who are barely acquainted with it nonetheless understand perfectly well ‘what it’s all about’?¹⁷

Whatever one might think about this *prima facie* implausible suggestion, it at least helps to make sense of what it is that so infuriates Tartaglia about the ‘new paradigm’ approach to the question of the meaning of life. For while these philosophers typically underline the notorious obscurity, vagueness, ambiguity and elusiveness of the expression at the outset—usually as a prelude to getting clear about the variety of ways it can be, has been, and might legitimately be construed—Tartaglia regards all such attempts at conceptual disambiguation and clarification as both gratuitous and disingenuous in view of what he regards as one blindingly obvious fact: namely, that the meaning of the expression ‘the meaning of life’ is *already clear to everyone*. Those who might be inclined to dispute this by pointing out that the expression appears to admit of a wide variety of different, often incompatible or at best overlapping usages, and that the variety of ways it *has* in fact been construed bears witness to this, are accused by Tartaglia of deliberate obfuscation, of muddying perfectly transparent waters, and of perpetuating a ruinous neglect of the only ‘real’ or ‘true’ meaning of the question—the meaning that, according to Tartaglia, it has *always* had, and which it *must retain* if philosophy is to rediscover its true identity and purpose.

¹⁷ Tartaglia (2016a).

Thus, although Tartaglia describes himself as an analytic philosopher, he has very little patience with the suggestion that the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ is one that *requires* any conceptual analysis at all—beyond, that is, a few quick reminders about how the expression is supposedly used in everyday life.¹⁸ While he starts with the fact that the question has been dismissed, denigrated and ridiculed because of its ‘supposedly hopeless obscurity,’ he suggests that the ridicule is only a defence mechanism—laughter, he says, ‘always works well when dealing with something that has touched a nerve.’¹⁹ As for the claim that the meaning of the question is obscure, vague, ambiguous and so on, Tartaglia seems to think this amounts to some kind of subterfuge. Thus when Brooke Alan Trisel remarks, in a recent article for this journal, that the expression ‘meaning of life’ is ‘one of the best known, but most obscure phrases in the English language’; when Richard Taylor writes that ‘[t]he question of whether life has any meaning is difficult to interpret,’ adding that the more we concentrate on it ‘the more it seems to elude’ us and ‘evaporate as an intelligible question’; when Julian Baggini writes that the question is ‘vague, general and unclear... not so much a single question as a placeholder for a whole set of questions’; and when Timothy Mawson writes that ‘when one asks “What is the meaning of life?,” one asks an ambiguous question, or—perhaps better—one asks an assemblage of largely overlapping, but significantly different, questions at once’; in all these cases, along with dozens more that could be cited, Tartaglia would suspect the authors of either disingenuousness or wilful obscurantism (or both); that is, of pretending not to understand the meaning of a question the intention of which ought to be entirely obvious to everyone—and to *philosophers* above all.²⁰ To the ridiculers and the head scratchers respectively, then, Tartaglia’s response is as follows: ‘the question is as serious as your life and its intention is anything but obscure.’²¹

In the following three sections I will critically assess two questions that arise

¹⁸ Tartaglia identifies himself as an analytic philosopher in the first paragraph of the Preface (p. ix). As readers of the book will discover, this is not the only concept he seems to think requires no real conceptual analysis or elucidation: the same goes for all the book’s central concepts, including meaning, consciousness, experience, objectivity, reality, and transcendence.

¹⁹ Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

²⁰ Trisel (2016), p. 4; Taylor (1967/2000), p. 167; Baggini (2005), p. 2; Mawson (2010), p. 20. One is reminded of Berkeley’s famous remark about philosophers kicking up dust and then complaining they can’t see. As noted above, Tartaglia also has another, even less charitable suggestion: such philosophers are just ‘very confused’ (2015a, p. 4).

²¹ Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

from this claim. First, what, according to Tartaglia, is the precise import of the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, and what reasons does he offer in support of his claim that this is ‘anything but obscure’? Second, why does he claim that the question is ‘as serious as your life’? I will address the first question in section 3 before tackling the second in sections 4 and 5.

3. Clarifying the Meaning of the Question

So far all we know is that Tartaglia’s ‘real’ question of the meaning of life is equivalent to the question of whether there is an ‘overall meaning’ or purpose for which the human species exists. What, however, does *that* mean? Well, it turns out that Tartaglia has in mind something very specific indeed: life, we are told, could *only* be meaningful if there were a *wider context of meaning* within which it takes place. Now, when Tartaglia says ‘wider’ he doesn’t just mean *wider*; he means a *whole lot* wider; in fact, he tells us, only something which *transcends the entire physical universe* could do the job. This is because things can *only* have a meaning if they are placed in a ‘wider context of meaning,’ and the physical universe is *not* a context of meaning; rather, it is a *meaningless* context. It follows, then, that for our lives to have any meaning or purpose at all, ‘there would have to be a wider context of meaning beyond the physical universe, on which the existence of the physical universe depended,’ ‘a context of meaning that *transcended* the spatiotemporal world’ and which ‘would provide reasons for the existence of the physical universe.’²² For Tartaglia, then, what he calls the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life,²³ the only ‘obvious philosophical question in the area,’²⁴ is that which asks whether such a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ exists. The necessary and sufficient condition for a meaningful life—in the absence of which everyone’s life would be meaningless—thus turns out to be not only a cosmic one, but an *extra-cosmic*, supernatural, or (as Tartaglia prefers to say) ‘transcendent’ one.

Needless to say, these are all hugely contentious claims, and not ones to which anyone is likely to assent unless they are backed up by *exceptionally* strong arguments. So what is supposed to rationally motivate them, and what reasons does Tartaglia offer in justification of them? The first question—namely,

²² Ibid., p. 50.

²³ Tartaglia (2015a).

²⁴ Tartaglia (2016), p. 2.

what motivates Tartaglia to insist, so doggedly and dogmatically, that *this* specific form of the question is its *only* legitimate sense, the ‘only obvious philosophical question in the area’—I find somewhat baffling, and will return to in sections 4 and 5.²⁵ Regarding the first question—that of the arguments Tartaglia employs to support the claim—I will explore this in the following three subsections. In doing so, we will gain clarity about what it is that Tartaglia’s ‘real’ question of the meaning of life amounts to.

3.1 The Meaning of ‘the Meaning of ...’

First, though he says such analysis ought not to be necessary—it is not as if there is ‘an enigma in need of deciphering,’ he writes²⁶—Tartaglia does appeal to a brief elucidation of the meaning of the terms. Thus he insists that the question of the meaning *of* life must be sharply differentiated from meaning *in* life. He illustrates this with the analogy of a film. When we ask about meaning *in* a film, he claims, we are talking about such things as ‘what is motivating the characters, their personalities, trials and tribulations etc.’ When we ask after the meaning *of* the film, on the other hand, we are asking about its significance in a wider social or historical setting. Thus we might say that the meaning of an early Western, for example, is that it ‘reveals the negative stereotypes in early 20th century America towards Native Americans, and also perhaps the new-found confidence of a country creating an idealised version of its history.’ It is this sort of thing we are asking about, suggests Tartaglia, when we ask about ‘the meaning of the film.’ From this he concludes as follows:

Thus *meaning in* concerns the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon (such as a film, novel, sport or musical composition), while *meaning of* concerns the meaning of the phenomenon in a wider context (a society, most typically).²⁷

²⁵ Tartaglia might object to the accusation of dogmatism, but in view of the fact that he insists upon the undeniable obviousness of the claim, even accusing those who disagree with it of being *anti-philosophical*, quite literally on page 1 of the book, the charge is hardly a baseless one.

²⁶ Tartaglia (2015), p. 96; cf. Tartaglia (2016): ‘The question did not drop from the sky as an enigma to be deciphered, but is rather a natural question which we know human beings have been asking since at least the beginning of civilization and were probably asking long before that’ (p. 2).

²⁷ Tartaglia (2015), pp. 92, 93.

Is this plausible? When people ask about the meaning of a film, novel, play, song, poem, fable, allegory, parable, riddle and so on, *are* they asking about its significance in a wider social or historical setting? Fortunately, we do not need to engage in any contentious ordinary language analysis or ‘x-phi’ (experimental philosophy) research on this question. Instead, we can simply enter phrases such as ‘the meaning of the film’ and ‘the meaning of the song’ into an internet search engine and see what it comes up with. While I will leave this an exercise for the reader rather than citing examples of what turned up when I did such searches,²⁸ I think it will be clear enough that what people typically want to know when they ask such questions is *not* what its social or historical significance might be. Rather, what they seem to be seeking is something like an *explanation* or *interpretation*, the kind of explanation that would *make sense* of the film, song, poem, play or whatever it happens to be.²⁹ This becomes even clearer, I think, if we ask about the *overall* meaning of something, which is what Tartaglia says the question of the meaning of life amounts to. For as noted earlier, while it makes dubious sense at best to ask about the overall meaning of a biological species, people *do* ask about the overall meaning of *narratives*. Indeed, I would suggest that it is precisely contexts in which people are asking about the meaning of a film, story, play, myth, saga, allegory, fable, parable and the like that talk of ‘overall meaning’ seems most at home. That such an interpretation might also shed light on what people often mean when they talk about ‘the meaning of life’—that is, roughly, that they are seeking something like a *global narrative*, *worldview* or *explanatory framework* within which to make overall sense of their lives—is a possibility that I have no space to examine here, but I return to it briefly at the end of the paper.³⁰

3.2 A Single Question or Many?

As noted above, philosophers who have written about the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ typically address what I called the ‘murky and mercurial’

²⁸ I will only add that it helps include the titles of well-known films, songs, stories etc.—and that the website <moviemeanings.com> seems like a good place to go if you want to read interpretations of popular films.

²⁹ This is not to suggest that such requests for explanation or interpretation might not sometimes require some socio-historical contextualisation, of course, but my point is that this is not what people *typically want to be told* about when they ask, for example, ‘what is the meaning of this movie?’

³⁰ For an intriguing proposal along these lines see Seachris (2009). For some interesting discussion of the implications vis-à-vis naturalism see Trisel (2016) and the literature cited therein.

nature of the question at the beginning. No doubt *some* of the ambiguity and indeterminateness of the question concerns the term ‘life,’ for it is not clear whether the question is asking about the meaning of *human life as a whole*, the meaning of *people’s individual lives*, or both. According to Metz, for example, as we saw above, what people who ask the question typically want to know is ‘what would confer meaning on their own lives and the lives of those people for whom they care.’³¹ For Tartaglia, on the other hand, as well as many of those who approach the question from a theistic perspective, the question is primarily about the purpose or overall meaning of human life in general, an answer to which would *also* provide the meaning of people’s individual lives. Nevertheless, in spite of this difference, it is at least agreed that the ‘life’ that the question addresses is *human* life rather than the life of lives of bacteria, barnacles, bison or baboons. It therefore does not seem to be the case that it is any real obscurity about what the term ‘life’ refers to that is the principal source of the question’s ambiguity.

What is generally acknowledged to be the obscurity, vagueness, ambiguity and indeterminacy of the question, then, primarily concerns the notoriously slippery meaning of the term ‘meaning’ itself. Yet although Tartaglia admits that ‘there are undeniably many different senses of the word “meaning,”’ so that ‘the question clearly has plenty of scope for obscurity,’ he claims that ‘this is irrelevant, because there is only one obvious philosophical question in the area, to which senses like “value,” “significance” and “purpose” are easily related.’³² The problem with this suggestion is that the terms ‘value,’ ‘significance’ and ‘purpose’ are obviously *not* synonymous or interchangeable. Indeed, it is precisely *because* they are not typically used synonymously that what Tartaglia says about ‘meaning’ here—namely, that ‘there are undeniably many different senses of the word’—carries over to the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Thus when Joshua Seachris writes, in the General Introduction to a recent anthology entitled *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, that the question is ‘undeniably characterized by significant vagueness,’ and that ‘one cannot plausibly deny that this vagueness makes the question difficult to understand,’ he is simply reporting the conclusion arrived at by the vast majority of philosophers who have examined the question.³³ Of course, it is always open

³¹ Metz (2013), p. 3.

³² Tartaglia (2016), p. 2.

³³ Seachris (2012), p. 3.

to someone to stipulate the specific way *they* are going to interpret the question, or to argue for the way they think it *ought* to be understood. However, this is obviously very different from claiming, as does Tartaglia, that the meaning of the question is ‘anything but obscure’ and that the only reason it might *seem* obscure is that ‘the form it has acquired has potential to mislead’—a potential which some philosophers ‘have willingly latched onto,’ either because they are part of an ‘anti-philosophical cultural trend,’ because they are afraid that they might be seen to be taking a religious question seriously,³⁴ or because they want to change the subject entirely so that they can ‘engage in secular moralising’ and become ‘atheist preachers.’³⁵ Thus when Tartaglia says that he emphasises ‘the impersonal question of why human beings exist... simply because it is what the question of the meaning of life concerns,’ adding that he regards this as ‘a statement of the obvious, despite the fact that professional philosophy went to considerable lengths during the last century to make it seem otherwise,’³⁶ it seems to me that it may be Tartaglia himself rather than those philosophers who have been the targets of his criticism who is being disingenuous.

In order to see that the expressions ‘meaning of *x*,’ ‘value of *x*’ and ‘purpose of *x*’ are *not* synonymous or intersubstitutable, in most contexts at least, one need only call to mind typical instances in which they *are* used. Indeed, are there *any* situations in which one uses the word ‘meaning’ where ‘value’ or ‘purpose’ would have done just as well, or in which, although one says ‘meaning’ it is obviously implied that what one intends is ‘value’ or ‘purpose’? Though one may be able to think of some such situations, the fact that they do not readily spring to mind suggests that it is certainly not what one *typically means* when one talks about the ‘meaning of’ something. Thus, when, in everyday situations, someone asks ‘What is the meaning of this?,’ it would be exceptionally

³⁴ This is a curious imputation, yet one that Tartaglia reiterates throughout the book. More curious still, he seems to think that something like this is the principal motivation for naturalism and physicalism. Thus the only reason anyone thinks ‘science in anything like the form we understand it’ could resolve the problem of the nature of consciousness is that, having ‘grasped that it will not fit into a scientific world-view, most philosophers become frightened.’ This is because ‘if you believe reality outruns the physical, then you seem to have strayed into the realms of religion: you have opened up the possibility that there is a meaning of life’ (Tartaglia 2016, p. 10). Tartaglia never really attempts to substantiate such bald assertions, and they seem to be based upon little more than amateur psychologising. Yet he depends on them for a whole lot of heavy-lifting, not only in terms of how he characterises the history of philosophy, and the dialectical dynamics of philosophical debate (see, e.g., pp. 178–181), but also in his accounts of what he takes to be the motivational sources of science, philosophy, and religion (*passim*).

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 1, 4–5, 10–11, 12ff. and *passim*. Tartaglia (2015a), pp. 3–4.

³⁶ Tartaglia (2016), p. 3.

tendentious to suggest that what they usually mean to ask is ‘What is the *value* of this?’ or ‘What is the *purpose* of this?’ Moreover, as we have seen above, Tartaglia argues that when we ask after the meaning *of* something we are talking about ‘the meaning of the phenomenon in a wider context.’ But, to stick to his own example, even if we were to agree that there might be contexts in which, when someone asks ‘what is the meaning of this film?’, what they want to know about is its wider social or historical significance, we would obviously *not* thereby be asking what its *value* or *purpose* is. Indeed, regardless of who is right about what people typically mean when they ask about the meaning of a movie, play, poem, fable, song and so on—that is, whether they mean to ask about its social or historical significance (as Tartaglia maintains) or rather about how it ought to be interpreted (as I have suggested)—in neither case would they be asking about its value or its purpose.

In response to such objections Tartaglia might claim that, although it is obviously true that the terms not *always* used synonymously or interchangeably, they nonetheless *are* so used whenever one asks the question—the *real* question, that is—of the meaning of life. The problem with this response is that, if this were so, it ought to be obvious that the following three questions are all asking the same thing: ‘What is the value of the human species?’ ‘What is the purpose of the human species?’ ‘What is the significance of the human species?’ What a sentence means, of course, typically depends upon the intention of the speaker, the context of usage, the other sentences to which it is inferentially connected, and so on. But without running through a list of possible interpretations of these questions, or examples of how they might be used in different situations, I think it ought to be clear enough that, on the face of it at least, they do *not* all appear to be asking the same thing.

It is starting to look as though Tartaglia’s one true question, the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, is not a single question after all, but rather—as many of those Tartaglia has rebuked for failing to understand (or else feigning not to understand) its only ‘obvious’ meaning have argued—a disjunctive one, which breaks down upon analysis into a series of partially overlapping yet distinct questions sharing at best a certain family resemblance.³⁷ Indeed, Timothy Mawson has argued—quite persuasively in my opinion—that it is precisely *because* the question is equivocal, ambiguous and multiply

³⁷ See, e.g., Baggini (2005), Hepburn (1965), Mawson (2010), and Metz (2013).

interpretable in this way, that people who ask it tend to find any *single answer* to it unsatisfactory.³⁸ Whether or not that is so, I think enough has been said to make it clear that, contrary to what Tartaglia maintains, there is no one obvious, clear, univocal or universal meaning to the expression ‘the meaning of life.’³⁹ What still remains to be done is to clarify the specific sense in which Tartaglia intends the question to be understood. This I will do in the next subsection, before going on to ask, in section 4, why he thinks it matters so much.

3.3 *Whose Meaning?*

Although, as we have seen, there is no single, univocal meaning or interpretation of the question of the meaning of life, there is nevertheless one perspective from which it *would* make sense to think of the value, purpose and significance of human beings as synonymous. In order to see this, let us recall Tartaglia’s characterisation of the meaning of the question as he sees it:

[T]he question is as serious as your life and its intention is anything but obscure; though the form it has acquired has potential to mislead, which some have willingly latched onto. For asking ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leads immediately to a question everyone understands, namely ‘why do human beings exist?’ These questions are distinct because the former presupposes there *is* a reason we exist, in order to consequently ask what ‘meaning’—in the sense of value—this reason provides to human life.⁴⁰

According to Tartaglia, then, the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ is equivalent to asking ‘What is the reason we exist?’ where it assumed that, if there *is* such a reason, this would make our lives *meaningful* in the sense of being *valuable*. By parity of logic, then, if there *is* no such value-conferring reason for our existence, our lives would be *meaningless*, in the sense of being *valueless* or *worthless*. By way of further clarification, Tartaglia provides the following, more succinct formulation:

³⁸ Mawson (2010).

³⁹ Even less do I think it is an *ahistorical* question, in the sense of being a question that people have *always asked*, though Tartaglia claims it is, largely on the basis of a rather tendentious interpretation of the epic of Gilgamesh (Tartaglia 2016, pp. 61–3).

⁴⁰ Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

The question boils down to: what is the value of human life which accounts for us being here? Or less carefully but more naturally: what are we here for?⁴¹

The first, supposedly more careful way of putting it, seems a little opaque. Unless we assume something along the lines of John Leslie's 'axiarchism,'⁴² how could a 'value' account for the existence of the human species? In light of what precedes it, however, I think it is clear that what Tartaglia means to say here—the correct 'careful' formulation of the question—would be this: 'What is the value-conferring reason why the human species exists?'

But this still leaves us with the question of why the *reason* something exists should be supposed to confer a *value* upon it. Clearly, when Tartaglia talks here about the *reason* something exists, he is not talking about what *causes* it to exist in the sense that, for example, we might say such-and-such atmospheric conditions cause clouds or hurricanes to form. What he seems to mean, rather, is that the reason something exists would confer a value on it in the sense that it would be valuable *to* whoever it was that *designed* or *created* it. That this is what Tartaglia has in mind is strongly suggested by the example he uses to illustrate it: computers have a meaning or value, he says, in the sense that 'they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them.'⁴³ But if this is what Tartaglia means, and if (as he also stipulates) only something that transcends the physical universe, and upon which it depends, could provide life with meaning, then what his question boils down to is simply this: 'Why did God create us?'

I think this clearly *is* what Tartaglia means by the question, and indeed it is only when thus construed that it makes sense to think of the purpose, value and significance of something *as synonymous expressions*. It bears emphasis, however, that this would be the purpose, value and significance that we have *for* whoever or whatever 'created' us. Only in a highly derivative sense would it be *our own* meaning, purpose, significance or value. For the three questions mentioned—about the value, significance and purpose of the human species—only look like the *same* question *from the point of view of God*.

So it appears that what Tartaglia insists is the only 'real' question of the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴² See, e.g., Leslie (1970).

⁴³ Tartaglia (2016), p. 2.

meaning of life is nothing other than the *theological* question, ‘For what reason did God create human beings?’, where it is assumed that this reason would confer ‘overall meaning’—that is, value, significance and purpose—upon our lives, both collectively and individually. Such an interpretation is further supported by the fact that he says that the very form of the question, “‘what is the meaning of life?’” presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with by God, would be the standard presupposition.’⁴⁴

So now we understand the sense in which Tartaglia thinks that the question is ‘anything but obscure’—or rather, we now know how he thinks what he calls the ‘real’ question *ought* to be interpreted. What we still do not know, however, is *why* he insists that this is the only ‘real’ question, the only truly *philosophical* sense of the question, and why he tells us that this question is ‘as serious as your life.’ I will examine some possible answers to these questions in what follows.

4. Why *This* Question? Why Does It Matter?

Were Tartaglia a theist we could make immediate sense of his doctrinaire insistence upon the particular form of the question that he does. Yet as we already know, from the very title of the book if nothing else, Tartaglia does not think life *has* any meaning: *life is meaningless*—this is what Tartaglia calls ‘nihilism.’ Why then does he maintain, so adamantly and uncompromisingly, that this theological (or crypto-theological) question is the only genuinely *philosophical* meaning the question can have? More than that, why would he contend that this is *the* philosophical question par excellence, the question that defines philosophy’s subject matter, and which philosophers should openly ‘reclaim’ as the very core of their discipline and their principal, motivating concern? What motivates him to regard this question as ‘the keystone of philosophy,’ the question that ‘locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place,’ that without which those preoccupations ‘fall apart and fragment, losing the form that makes them credible’?⁴⁵ Could Tartaglia’s proposed *answer* to the question provide some essential clues here?

⁴⁴ Tartaglia (2015), p. 93; cf. p. 95: ‘any philosopher who thinks God endows our lives with meaning is talking about the traditional question.’ In Tartaglia (2016), p. 13, he also makes it clear that whenever God is invoked in these debates it’s a sure sign that ‘the traditional question’ is at stake.

⁴⁵ Tartaglia (2016), p. 7.

4.1 Rejecting the Premise of the Question

It is important to note that the account I have given above somewhat underplays an essential qualification that Tartaglia makes right at the outset. Having clarified the sense in which he thinks the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ amounts to asking ‘Why do human beings exist?’, where this presupposes that there *is* such a reason and that this reason would confer ‘meaning’ in the sense of ‘value’ upon human life, he writes:

But before you can begin to ask this *philosophically*, you must first ask whether there is any reason we are here at all; which is why the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ leaves space for ‘there isn’t one’ as an appropriate response.⁴⁶

Similarly, in his article on Metz for the present journal, he writes:

The form of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with by God, would be the standard presupposition. But as with all questions of this form, it leaves room for us to reject its presupposition by appropriately answering that there is no meaning of life.⁴⁷

Why rejecting the presupposition of a theological question should transform it into a ‘philosophical’ question Tartaglia does not say, but rejecting the presupposition of the question is indeed what he does. This is not to say that he *critically examines* this presupposition, however, in the sense of calling into question the assumption that only a value-conferring reason why the human species exists, or a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe, could make human life meaningful. He does not ask, in other words, whether or not it is *a good question*. Nor does he ask whether such a ‘transcendent context’ *could* provide life with meaning.⁴⁸ Rather, as we have

⁴⁶ Tartaglia (2016), p. 1 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁷ Tartaglia (2015), p. 93.

⁴⁸ In sections 4.3 and 4.4 I will present reasons for thinking that the answer to this question is negative.

seen, he insists that this is the *only* legitimate philosophical sense of the question. Nor does Tartaglia critically examine any arguments theists have presented for thinking there *might be* such a transcendent reason or context. Indeed, although he argues that philosophers ought to embrace the question of the meaning of life, in the sense outlined above, as their essential motivating concern, he shows no interest whatsoever in any position that does *not* reject the presupposition of the question from the outset. The *only* answer to the question that he calls ‘the keystone of philosophy’ that seems of any interest to him is the purely negative one: there *is* no value-conferring reason why the human species exist. From this Tartaglia infers that *life is meaningless*, and this is supposed to entail that the life of each and every person who has ever lived, or who is alive today, or who will ever live, is *also* meaningless—that is, without value, purpose, or significance. This is what Tartaglia calls ‘the truth of nihilism,’ and he regards it as philosophy’s greatest discovery, the unassailable proof of its ability to make substantial epistemic progress.⁴⁹

While all of this is clear enough, it only makes the issue of *why* Tartaglia thinks this question is such a profound and philosophically significant one all the more baffling. For we have now learnt that the question which he insists is the fundamental motivating concern of philosophy, that which unifies its various branches, and that upon which he pins his hopes for rescuing philosophy from cultural oblivion, is one *whose core presupposition he rejects from the outset*. I will return to the issue of why he rejects this presupposition shortly. First, however, let us briefly examine what he thinks the consequences of rejecting this presupposition ought to be.

4.2 The Consequences of Nihilism: ‘Just act ordinary’

Since Tartaglia maintains that what he calls ‘the real question of the meaning of life’ is a question of profound significance, a matter of natural and ultimate human concern, and the fundamental question at the root of all philosophy and religion, one might suppose that he would also hold that it ought to be a matter of profound human concern if it turned out that the question itself is based upon a false presupposition—if it turned out, that is, as he argues is the case, that life simply *has* no meaning, value or purpose.

⁴⁹ Tartaglia (2016), pp. 74–8 especially.

But here things get more puzzling still. For Tartaglia tells us throughout the book that it just *doesn't matter* that life has no meaning. Realising 'the truth of nihilism'—that is, that human life is meaningless and worthless—should not be 'expected to change our behaviour in any way,' nor 'to change how we feel about ourselves.'⁵⁰ For nihilism, being 'just a neutral fact,'⁵¹ is wholly 'lacking in practical consequences,' and therefore 'realizing the truth of nihilism' should 'be of no relevance within life.'⁵² Contrary to those who fear that widespread belief that life is meaningless might be a matter of social and moral concern, Tartaglia asserts that 'there is no reason this belief should affect us practically at all, unless we were previously under the false impression that life has a meaning.'⁵³

As for the view that belief in nihilism might 'threaten our commitments' in any way, Tartaglia claims 'there is nothing to it.' After all, 'just because our goals are not imposed from on high, and we realise this,' he writes, 'it does not follow that we cannot commit to them.'⁵⁴ Nor should realising the truth of nihilism, and thus embracing the meaninglessness of our existence, in any way affect which activities we choose to prioritise in life. Nihilism 'can have no bearing on such a decision, since its assessment of our activities as ultimately pointless is indiscriminating and uniform.' Nor should acknowledgement of the meaninglessness of our lives make the things we choose to do with our lives *absurd* in any way. For if some activities 'do occasionally strike us as absurd,' he writes, 'this can only be in comparison to others,' since 'there is nothing outside of life' that could make *all* of our activities seem absurd.⁵⁵

It is something of a puzzle that Tartaglia does not think that what goes for

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 41

⁵¹ Ibid., p. ix.

⁵² Ibid., p. 42.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 175. Such comments (compare that just quoted about 'being under the false impression that life has a meaning') make it quite clear that Tartaglia's book is *not addressed to religious people*. He certainly presents no arguments against theistic beliefs, and I hardly think many people of religious faith are likely to be persuaded by his implicit suggestion that they should realise there is no god and that their lives have no overall meaning, value or purpose when they are bored (pp. 25–34), or if they simply 'retreat to a physical perspective, and think of human life as consisting in bodies moving around and making noises' (p. 25; cf. p. 85). That Tartaglia takes atheism for granted in this way means that he fails to think through the veritable 'total world revolution' that universal acceptance of 'the truth of nihilism' would involve, and blinds him to the possibility that a great many conflicts around the world today, not to mention the global resurgence of religious fundamentalism, might have their roots in resistance to and fear of precisely what he calls 'nihilism.' Were he aware of this, at least, I doubt he would treat the issue of the consequences of nihilism with the insouciance that he does.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

absurdity also goes for meaninglessness, for the cases seem entirely analogous. That is to say, if some of our activities sometimes strike us as meaningless, this can only be in comparison with others that we *do* we find meaningful. Thus if there is nothing outside our lives in comparison with which it makes sense to say our lives are *absurd*, for the very same reason there is nothing outside our lives in comparison with which it makes sense to say they are *meaningless* either.⁵⁶ Oddly, Tartaglia makes a similar point when he takes issue with Thomas Nagel's suggestion that when we 'step back' from our lives and regard them *sub specie aeternitatis*, our lives seem unimportant. In response Tartaglia says that the assumption 'that only a meaning of life can bestow importance seems both unmotivated and entirely expendable.' 'It seems,' he adds, 'like a leftover religious dogma.'⁵⁷ But if this goes for the *importance* of life, why does Tartaglia not draw the same conclusion with regard to the *meaning* of life? Why, in other words, does he conclude from the fact that there is no supernatural or transcendent 'context of meaning' that *our lives are meaningless*? Is this not why Nietzsche called nihilism a 'pathological transitional stage' in which, because faith is lost in a divine guarantor for truth, meaning and value, 'the tremendous generalization' is made, 'the inference *that there is no meaning at all*'?⁵⁸

At any rate, Tartaglia is clear: nihilism ought to have no consequences for our lives. To quote from the opening sentence of the book, the fact that our lives are meaningless is 'just a neutral fact.' It is neither good nor bad, and people who worry about it, or about the consequences which might follow from belief in it, are simply misguided. For even those who *do* believe in God-given meaning, value and purpose—which would include the world's 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus, and so on—Tartaglia suggests that all they have to lose is a 'false belief,' along with whatever 'illusory motivations' that belief might have provided.⁵⁹ For these reasons, he maintains,

⁵⁶ Thus, to adapt a retort sometimes attributed to Voltaire, the best response to the statement that 'life is meaningless' might be: 'Compared to what?' Tartaglia responds to a similar objection in the fourth section of his second chapter (and even cites the retort just mentioned, albeit in response to the remark that 'Life's a funny thing,' from a 1950s Robert Wise film, in which the line attributed to Voltaire is delivered by Susan Hayward's character, p. 53), but his response essentially boils down to reiterating the idea that human life is meaningless because this meaning is not 'constitutive of what it is to be a human being,' since there is 'no wider context of meaning' (p. 55), and it is precisely these claims that I find most puzzling (as discussed in the next subsection, 4.3).

⁵⁷ Tartaglia (2016), p. 46.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche (1883–1888/1968), p. 14 (emphasis in German original).

⁵⁹ Tartaglia (2016), p. 42. With respect to this claim, see n. 54 above.

no ‘coping strategies’ are needed: ‘As you were!,’ seems to be Tartaglia’s considered advice; or, to quote from Chapter 2, tellingly entitled ‘A Survey of Misguided Coping Strategies,’ he writes:

As to the question of what we should do upon realizing the truth of nihilism, then, there may be more than a little relevance in Lin-Chi’s advice to ‘Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down.’⁶⁰

With this we seem to be further than ever from understanding why Tartaglia deems this question to be such a profoundly important one. For if the question is simply based upon a false presupposition, and rejecting it has no consequences for our lives, how *could* it be the ultimate natural concern for human beings? How could such an inconsequential question be the ultimate wellspring of philosophy and religion? Why would it be ‘as serious as your life’? None of this is clear at this point. And things are about to get stranger still.

4.3 An Isolated Philosophical Concern

When someone says they think their life is meaningless or worthless, or judges someone else to be living a meaningless or worthless life, we usually take them to be making a social or moral judgement regarding the *value* of that life. Indeed, it is often implied that human lives that are meaningless, worthless, aimless and pointless are lives that are *not worth living*.⁶¹ Yet it turns out that, although Tartaglia maintains that life is meaningless, and although he *does* think this entails that each and every human life is meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant,⁶² this does not amount to an *evaluation* of anything—not, at least, in any sense one might readily recognise. He writes as follows:

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 44. Further sagely advice from a venerable Zen master is quoted in an accompanying note: ‘In this world we eat, we shit, we sleep and we wake up—and after all that all we have to do is die’ (p. 190 n. 3).

⁶¹ As indeed Tartaglia concedes when he writes that ‘worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them’ (ibid., p. 171).

⁶² This follows, of course, simply in virtue of the fact that ‘meaning’ is here being treated as synonymous with purpose, value and significance.

To say that life is meaningless *is* to say that it is valueless or worthless; but only in the sense that value is *not essential to what it is*. It is not to say that we are worthless in the *socially contextual* sense that would amount to a condemnation. For although our nature is not *intrinsically valuable*, we value many things, including ourselves. *We might not have done so*, so this value is *not essential to what we are, or to the other things we value*. But our capacity to think about and value anything has made us *contingently valuable*. The philosophical realisation that *value does not flow inevitably from our nature*—a nature which makes value possible—has practically no prospect of reversing this valuation; life is simply too compelling for a philosophical view about the nature of reality to have that kind of effect.⁶³

It will be worth pausing to unpack the implications of this, especially with regard to the words I have italicised. For what Tartaglia seems to be saying is that if the value of something is not an *intrinsic property* of that thing—that is, if its value is not something that belongs to the *nature* of that thing *in itself* or *as such*, regardless of its relations to anything else in the world—then it is *without value*, literally *worthless*. The trouble with this is that it is exceptionally difficult to understand what it is supposed to mean, or to think of any examples of anything that could possibly satisfy such a definition of ‘being valuable.’ We usually take the value of something to depend upon it being valued *by* or valuable *for* someone. Something is valuable not *per se* but rather in virtue of being valuable *to* an individual, group, society, or perhaps humans in general.⁶⁴ Yet Tartaglia’s implicit strictures regarding *intrinsic* value suggest that anything that depends for its value upon anything other than its own ‘intrinsic nature’ is not *really* valuable at all. For if we were talking about the value of something *to* or *for* someone, even if there were complete unanimity about this value, that would not count as an *intrinsic* value; that is, its value would not be something that belongs to its nature *as the very thing that it is*; its value would not ‘flow inevitably’ from its ‘intrinsic nature.’ Such value would thus not be *real* value,

⁶³ Ibid., p. 6; italics added. See also p. 171 where he claims that ‘the judgement that life is socially worthless is an evaluation whereas the judgement that life is meaningless is not.’ Note that he says this even though he is clear that, for him, for life to be meaningless just *is* for it to be worthless; for as he says on the first page of the book, ‘it is “meaning”—in the sense of value’ (p. 1) that is at stake.

⁶⁴ I think there is also a perfectly good sense in which things might be said to be valuable to other animal species as well, though it is not a crucial point here.

intrinsic value, Tartaglia seems to suggest, but rather only value in some metaphysically second-class, low grade, nickle-plated sense—namely, a ‘socially contextual sense.’⁶⁵

There has of course been a long tradition of philosophers, stretching back to Plato at least, who have debated the question of ‘intrinsic value’ in the context of ethics, where the idea of something valuable ‘in itself,’ ‘for its own sake,’ ‘in its own right’ or ‘as an end in itself’ is typically contrasted with that which is ‘instrumentally valuable,’ or valuable for the sake of something else, or as a means for someone else. For Kant, for example, it is *rational beings* or *persons*, understood as ends-in-themselves, that are the bearers of ultimate, intrinsic or ‘final’ value. All such discussions, however, have traditionally concerned what is intrinsically good or valuable *for human beings* or *in human society*.⁶⁶ Once such talk is taken out of the sphere of ethics altogether, however, as Tartaglia has done here, I have serious doubts about whether anything intelligible is being said at all.⁶⁷ For what does intrinsic value even *mean* in this case? If, as I have suggested above, it means a property an object would have independently of everything else that exists—or even *whether* anything else exists—I am at a loss to imagine what *could* be valuable in *that* sense. In fact, to employ one of the favourite conceits of contemporary analytic metaphysics, I find that I’m unable to conceive of any such thing *in any possible world*.

Of course, it may be that I simply lack the powers of rational intuition that many proponents of contemporary analytic metaphysics seem to believe they possess: the power, that is, to consult their ‘modal intuitions’ in order to discover what is and is not possible ‘across all possible worlds.’ But if we restrict ourselves to conversing among the mortals for the moment, it seems to me that if *anything* has ‘intrinsic’ value or value ‘in itself,’ ‘for its own sake,’ ‘as such,’ ‘in its own right,’ or however else one might put it—that is, if we can make sense of such a notion at all—I think most people would say that *life on earth*, and perhaps *human life* in particular, is the very best candidate we have. Yet

⁶⁵ When going through a draft of this paper it dawned on me that I’d unwittingly plagiarised Mark Twain’s *Letters from the Earth*, wherein Satan, in his first letter from earth, describes man ‘at his very best’ as ‘a sort of low grade nickel-plated angel’ (Twain 1909/1962, p. 7). It works a whole lot better in its original context, but I decided to leave it in, if only to have an excuse for bringing Twain’s scathing brilliant and hilarious but much neglected satire to the reader’s attention.

⁶⁶ The only reason I say ‘traditionally’ is that more recently such discussions have also been extended to environmental ethics and animal welfare. For a helpful overview see Zimmerman (2015).

⁶⁷ Tartaglia makes it clear throughout the book that he does not think the issue ought to have any bearing upon ethics or morality whatsoever.

notice that this is precisely what Tartaglia is telling us *cannot* have any ‘intrinsic value’ or ‘intrinsic worth,’ since this worth is supposedly ‘not essential to what it is’ and ‘does not flow inevitably from our nature.’ But if that is the case, perhaps Tartaglia could provide some examples of what sort of thing *does* or even *could* have ‘intrinsic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘necessary’ value in this sense?

A further problem with Tartaglia’s appeal to ‘intrinsic value’ here is that it would seem to violate his own stipulations regarding the necessary conditions for something to count as meaningful or valuable in the first place. For, as we have seen above, Tartaglia makes it clear on the first page of his Introduction that the ‘real’ question of the meaning of life concerns what would confer “‘meaning”—in the sense of value’ upon human life. We also saw that he defines meaning *relationally*. That is to say, Tartaglia holds that for something to have meaning (‘in the sense of value’), there must be a ‘wider context of meaning’ *within which* it would be meaningful or valuable. But if meaning and value necessarily depend upon there being such a wider context—which is something Tartaglia insists upon throughout the book—it is hard to see how he can coherently claim that human life is worthless on the grounds that it is not *intrinsically* valuable, in the sense that this value is not ‘essential to what we are’ and does not ‘flow inevitably’ from our intrinsic nature.⁶⁸

Given that Tartaglia very clearly believes that, if we *had* been created for a reason by a transcendent deity, then our lives *would* be intrinsically meaningful and valuable, the only sense I can make of all this is that he thinks ‘intrinsic value’—*real* meaning, value and purpose—would have to be *divinely bestowed* value. Yet even if one could coherently maintain that intrinsic value could be both *wholly non-relational*—in the sense that it would have to be an essential property of a thing in itself, regardless of the existence of anything else—and at the same time *essentially relational*—in the sense of necessarily depending upon a wider context of meaning—there are still further problems. For one, why would someone who rejects theism or creationism outright, and who finds no reason whatsoever to take it seriously, insist upon such metaphysically inflated, theological notions of meaning, value, purpose and significance in the first place? If Nagel’s suggestion that our lives can seem trivial when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* ‘seems like a leftover religious dogma,’ what are we to make

⁶⁸ I am grateful to Thaddaeus Metz for suggesting that I might make this point more explicit, as well as for sending me a recent paper of his own in which he argues against a relational account of meaning quite similar to that of Tartaglia (see Metz 2015a).

of Tartaglia's conclusion that life is 'meaningless' and 'worthless' on account of the fact that we have no divinely conferred 'intrinsic' meaning and value?⁶⁹

Moreover, even if we *had* been created by a supernatural deity, why would *that* make our lives intrinsically valuable? Is Tartaglia suggesting that, had we been created by Odin or Yahweh or Allah or Zeus, our value *would* 'flow inevitably from our nature' and our lives *would* have intrinsic meaning? If so, to return to Tartaglia's example, does that mean that computers, since they have a meaning or value because 'they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them' also have an intrinsic value that 'flows inevitably' from their nature? After all, they *do* seem to have their value and function 'built-in' and 'externally determined': serving our needs is 'what they are here for.'⁷⁰ So are we to conclude that computers, shovels, lawn mowers and tooth picks have 'intrinsic value' whereas human life does not? And yet Tartaglia also suggests that, since it is not metaphysically necessary that we value the things that we do (for we 'might not have done so'), the things that we value do *not* have intrinsic value, for they do not have that value in virtue of being the things that they are. So are we to infer from this that, for something to have intrinsic value, it would not only have to have been created by a supernatural deity, but that it would also have to be *metaphysically necessary* that this deity value it, and could not have done otherwise?⁷¹

However Tartaglia might go about responding to such objections, we have seen that his thesis that 'life is meaningless' amounts to saying that our lives are meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant, but only in the sense that we have no *metaphysically 'intrinsic,' 'necessary,' 'essential' or 'constitutive' meaning, value, worth or significance*. What this means is that our value 'is not essential to what we are'; that it 'does not flow inevitably from our nature,' and is not 'constitutive of what it is to be a human being,' since there is 'no wider context of meaning'—that is, no supernatural context of meaning beyond the physical universe—that could confer such 'intrinsic' meaning or value upon us.

⁶⁹ Tartaglia (2016), p. 46. Cf. Nietzsche: '*Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes; plus the *realization* that we lack the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things that might be "divine" or morality incarnate' (1883–1888/1968, p. 9; emphasis in German original).

⁷⁰ Tartaglia (2016), p. 22.

⁷¹ I am here leaving aside the question of why such deities would not need to have *their* meaning, value and purpose conferred upon them by a wider context also—that is, why Tartaglia's stipulation that something can only have meaning if there is a wider context of meaning does not open up an infinite regress—but I raise it briefly in section 4.4 below.

All of this presumably also explains why, although Tartaglia calls all this ‘just a neutral fact,’ he also suggests that it is no *ordinary* fact, such as ‘the fact that life evolved on Earth.’ It is, rather, what he calls a ‘philosophical fact.’⁷² But what on earth, we might well wonder, is one of *those*? Do we have any more of them? If so, what are they, and why are they not more widely known? Is there an encyclopaedia where the complete collection of such putative facts might be consulted? If not, why not? And how are such facts established? In the present case, for example, what kinds of evidence are drawn upon, and what kinds of arguments are employed, in order to establish the special ‘philosophical’ fact that *life is meaningless*?

Disappointingly, perhaps, Tartaglia’s reason for rejecting the possibility that ‘life might have a meaning,’ far from involving any special powers of intellectual intuition or rational insight into what holds necessarily across all possible worlds, comes down to the rather more banal admission that, ‘like many others I can see no good reason to think it does.’⁷³ Moreover, unlike Metz, for example, who devotes the largest section of his book (comprising no less than four chapters) to critically assessing ‘supernaturalist’ approaches to the question of life’s meaning, Tartaglia does not bother addressing them at all. In view of the fact that Tartaglia reprimands Metz for *neglecting* the issue of whether or not humanity might have been created by a supernatural being, this is a peculiar state of affairs indeed.⁷⁴ For if what Tartaglia calls ‘the traditional question’ is nothing other than the question of what meaning God endowed our lives with,⁷⁵ and if this is the question Tartaglia exhorts philosophers to publicly embrace as their special area of expertise, one might think he would have some interest in those who have sought to *answer* it rather than just reject its premises from the outset. For even if, as he says, he cannot think of any reasons to suppose it to be true, one might think Tartaglia would at least engage with some of the reasons that *have* been offered, throughout the past two millennia, for thinking it might be. For if there is literally *no good reason* to suppose that any such reason can be found, and if those who think they have found such reasons

⁷² Ibid., p. 5

⁷³ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁴ Tartaglia acknowledges that Metz devotes ‘a large proportion’ of his book to ‘the traditional question’ (2015, p. 95), but this only gets him into more trouble with Tartaglia. Given what Metz had said about the book’s scope in his Introduction (see section 2 above), he is further chastised because he ‘does not even stick to his guns’ (2016a, p. 298). Metz, it seems, as ‘the main culprit’ among the ‘New-Paradigmers’ (ibid. 287–8), is damned if he does, damned if he doesn’t.

⁷⁵ Tartaglia (2015), p. 93.

are not even worth engaging with, why would we conclude that our lives are meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant, simply because this rationally unmotivated possibility fails to hold?

It is starting to look like the question of whether life has a meaning in Tartaglia's sense of these words—namely, the question of whether the human species has an overall meaning or purpose—is not very interesting at all; not even for Tartaglia. After all, if there are literally no good reasons for supposing it to be true, and the fact that it is *not* true has no implications for our lives—if it should not 'be expected to change our behaviour in any way,' nor to 'change how we feel about ourselves'—then why all the fanfare about the question in the first place? Why is it supposed to be 'a profound question; a deeply philosophical one'; a question that is 'as serious as your life'?⁷⁶

At the end of his first chapter Tartaglia argues that the entire issue of whether there is an overall meaning or purpose to life ought not to be thought relevant to ethics or morality in any way, and that the rejection of such meaning or purpose should be treated as 'an isolated concern; one relevant to a specific philosophical question.'⁷⁷ We have yet to see, however, why it should be of any *philosophical* (rather than theological) concern either. Moreover, if the meaninglessness of life has absolutely no implications for morality or ethics, what becomes of Tartaglia's thesis that the question of the meaning of life is 'the keystone of philosophy,' that which unites its theoretical and practical branches, and that without which it splinters into disparate, unconnected fragments?

Before turning to this question I will briefly take up Tartaglia's most explicit suggestion as to why 'the truth of nihilism' *should* matter to us after all.

4.4. Are Our Lives Meaningless?

Suppose we go along with Tartaglia and allow that to say that something is meaningless, valueless, worthless and insignificant *in philosophy* or *in metaphysics* is something completely different to what we would mean by those words in any other area of human discourse. Why would such an abstruse, metaphysical, 'neutral fact' regarding so-called 'intrinsic meaning' or 'intrinsic value' be of any interest to anyone?⁷⁸ Why would it be a matter of profound

⁷⁶ Tartaglia (2016), pp. 3, 39, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁷⁸ Given what Tartaglia seems to mean by this (see section 4.3), it *would* be a matter of concern to

philosophical and existential importance? In the Introduction to the book Tartaglia anticipates a similar response. He imagines a reader saying that, although she agrees that life has no ‘overall meaning,’ this doesn’t seem very interesting to her—it is, after all, what she had always assumed anyway. This imaginary interlocutor continues:

But then, once you’ve pointed that out, there isn’t really anything more to say, is there? Life is meaningless, and that’s it. It doesn’t lead anywhere interesting, as you’ve effectively conceded yourself: it doesn’t show that life is terrible ... or that anything goes ... or anything like that. So it’s a philosophical dead-end. It’s boring.

Tartaglia responds as follows:

But nihilism is not just any old fact: it entails that everybody’s life is meaningless, and hence that *your* life is too. This must strike you as more significant for the way you think about the world than the vast majority of philosophical ideas you have come across, if not all of them; if it is not like that for you as it is for me, then perhaps I should start taking solipsism seriously. It is a thought which resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing.⁷⁹

Tartaglia thus invites each of his readers to reflect on the significance of the fact that their own lives are meaningless. Here I will briefly outline my own response. Though I can only speak for myself, the reason this ‘philosophical fact’ does not strike me as significant is that, as we have seen above, what Tartaglia *means* by this is the following four things: (1) that there is no ‘overall meaning’ to human life; (2) that the human species was not created for a reason by a god or

many *religious people*, of course. For this reason it is all the more peculiar that Tartaglia does nothing to try to persuade such people that what he calls ‘nihilism’ might be true (cf. n. 54 above).

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 7. This is only the first part of Tartaglia’s response. In the second part he claims that, far from it being the case that the question of the meaning of life in his sense ‘doesn’t lead anywhere interesting,’ there is a sense in which ‘it leads everywhere in philosophy.’ It is in this context that he writes that the question of the meaning of life ‘is the keystone of philosophy’ which ‘locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place.’ Although I touch upon these claims in the next section, a proper examination of his arguments for them fall well outside the scope of this paper.

pantheon; (3) that there is no ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe; and (4) that human life does not have any ‘intrinsic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘metaphysically necessary’ value or purpose. Let me briefly address these in order.

Regarding (1), the idea that there is no ‘overall meaning’ to human life, that the human species has no ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose,’ does not strike me as significant in the least. In fact it just strikes me as confused. As noted in section 1 above, biological species are not the sorts of things that *could* have meanings or purposes, any more than a planet could (and no, it doesn’t strike me as philosophically deep or significant that Venus has no ‘overall meaning’ either). Regarding (2), the reason I do not find that significant is simply that I have never in my life supposed that we might have been created by a god—not even a whole team of them. Regarding (3), likewise, I have never entertained the idea that there might be a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ existing somehow ‘beyond the physical universe.’ Indeed, I am not at all sure I know what it means, much less have any idea how we might find out about such a thing even if it did exist. Moreover, even if I were to agree, for the sake of argument, that something can only be made meaningful by a ‘wider context of meaning,’ and that my life could only be meaningful if the physical universe had a meaning somehow bestowed upon it by a supernatural being or ‘transcendent context,’ it seems obvious that this would open up an infinite regress in which nothing could be meaningful anyway, as a matter of plain logic. For even if God had a reason for creating the physical universe, if the only thing that can make a life meaningful is a wider context of meaning, then God’s life too would need to belong to such a wider context, and so on to infinity. If, on the other hand, God does not need any such wider context, then neither do we, and there was never any need to start speculating about a mysterious supernatural or ‘transcendent’ context in the first place. And as for (4), the reason that my putative lack of ‘intrinsic,’ ‘essential’ or ‘metaphysically necessary’ value doesn’t strike me as significant is that, as I have argued at length in section 4.3, I do not think Tartaglia has provided a sufficiently coherent account of such value for it to make any impact upon me whatsoever.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Regarding Tartaglia’s final point, in the paragraph quoted above, that the thought that one’s life is meaningless ‘resonates throughout the understanding whenever you genuinely think about it, transfiguring everything while changing nothing,’ while I admit the possibility that I may not have what it takes to ‘genuinely think about it,’ I can only report that I have *tried* to think about it—quite genuinely—and yet, for better or worse, have experienced no such resonance or transfiguration.

4.5 The Keystone of Philosophy?

Although I am not persuaded by Tartaglia's reasons for suggesting that I ought to regard the 'intrinsic' meaninglessness of my life as a deeply significant 'philosophical fact,' I am not suggesting that he *should* start taking solipsism seriously. Perhaps, after all, it's just me, and most people would immediately understand the deep significance of all this. Perhaps Tartaglia's distinction between *intrinsic* and *necessary* meaning and value, on the one hand, and *social* and *moral* meaning and value on the other, is intuitively obvious to most people—in which case perhaps *I'm* the one who should consider taking solipsism seriously.

However, this doesn't seem to be what Tartaglia is suggesting either, for he goes on to say that metaphysical meaninglessness and worthlessness and social or moral meaninglessness and worthlessness are 'endlessly conflated in our culture.'⁸¹ Given Tartaglia's earlier insistence upon the obviousness of the true meaning of the question, this is surprising indeed. For if it's the case that the two questions are 'endlessly conflated in our culture,' then people evidently do *not* take the meaning of the question to be obvious in the way that Tartaglia suggests; nor can philosophers be blamed for having deliberately obfuscated the issue. Moreover, it follows that it is not just 'new paradigm' analytic philosophers who are 'very confused' about the meaning of the question.⁸² Rather, if the issues are 'endlessly conflated in our culture,' it follows that the confusion is endemic to 'our culture.'⁸³

It is for this sort of reason, I take it, that Tartaglia thinks philosophers—not the confused ones, obviously, but the 'real' ones, i.e. those 'good guys' who see the distinction between these issues as clearly and distinctly as does Tartaglia⁸⁴—ought to regain their self-confidence and reassert their voices in the

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸² Since Tartaglia thinks post-Nietzschean philosophers were 'obsessed' with the 'real' question, yet made the issue of 'social meaning' their 'principal concern' (2015, p. 91, 98), it follows that they too must have been 'very confused.' Moreover, since Tartaglia rejects 'the dubious assumption that there is a distinctive concept of social meaningfulness that merits specifically *philosophical* investigation,' it follows that *they* weren't doing genuine philosophy either (2016a, p. 297; italics in original).

⁸³ Tartaglia doesn't say what 'our culture' includes, so it could be that he thinks this confusion is only a malady of (say) 'Western' culture, and that in some cultures people are rarely if ever guilty of this egregious conflation. If that is the case, however, he doesn't tell us which cultures those might be.

⁸⁴ Tartaglia introduces 'the good guys'—that is, 'those philosophers who recognise the clear distinction between the question of the meaning of life and issues about social meaning'—at the end of an Appendix to his Introduction (2016, pp. 18–19). Based on this discussion it would seem that there is

cultural conversation of mankind. And indeed, if humanity is to survive for another few millennia, he suggests, ‘we need a lot more philosophical clarity on these matters.’⁸⁵ Such clear-sighted philosophers are needed so that people do not go around conflating intrinsic, necessary, metaphysical meaning, value, purpose and significance with the philosophically uninteresting, extrinsic, contingent, humdrum variety—that is, with what just about everyone else would take these words to mean. (One wonders what other vital services such philosophers might have in store for us befuddled folk.) And yet, apart from any misgivings we might have about metaphysicians bearing gifts of dubious value (to use the latter term in its standard ‘social’ sense rather than Tartaglia’s ‘philosophical’ sense), if the putative confusion is as widespread as Tartaglia suggests, it’s hard to see why he ever insisted that the correctness of his interpretation of the question was ‘a statement of the obvious,’ and berated so many other philosophers for having failed to realise this, in the first place.

In response, Tartaglia might concede the point that it is people in general (at least within ‘our culture’) and not just ‘new paradigm’ analytic philosophers who are ‘very confused’ about what he takes to be the obvious meaning of the question. Indeed, given that people from all walks of life seem to think that things like ‘happiness’ and ‘love’ count as appropriate answers to the question,⁸⁶ and given that he says the issues are ‘endlessly conflated in our culture,’ I do not see how he can reasonably deny it. (So much, then, for his arguments about how we typically use the terms, which, even if he can fend off the criticisms offered in section 3 above, turn out to be redundant anyway.) In conceding this, however, he might say that his point all along was not that there was only one *possible* interpretation of the question, but rather that there is only one real *philosophical*

(or was) only one *really* good guy, apart from Tartaglia himself: namely, the late Milton Munitz. However, in view of the fact that in his book on this issue Munitz himself dismissed the question of the meaning of life in Tartaglia’s sense as a pseudo-problem—‘a mirage and wholly gratuitous’ (Munitz 1993, p. 109)—it looks as though Tartaglia himself may be the *only* really good guy.

⁸⁵ See the end of the next footnote for the source of this quotation.

⁸⁶ To see the sorts of answers people think it appropriate to give to the question ‘What is the Meaning of Life?’ there is a website called ‘Excellence Reporter’ <excellencereporter.com> comprising more than 700 such answers from people of various walks of life (e.g., writers, artists, architects, monks, scientists, mystics, teachers, etc.). Having read a few dozen of them I can report that I came across not a single one in which the question was taken in anything like the sense Tartaglia claims to be obvious. The first five answers (it is listed alphabetically by surname) are as follows: ‘knowing and being our deepest being’; ‘leaving more behind than you take away’; ‘to do great things that make yourself and others happy’; ‘loving my wife and partner, loving my family and friends, loving the work that I do’; and ‘to find the best version of me every day.’ A recent addition is ‘The Meaning and the Meaninglessness of Life,’ by one James Tartaglia, from which I took the footnote 85 quotation.

interpretation of the question. After all, in the very first paragraph of the book he notes that the question of the meaning of life has picked up a ‘bad reputation’ because ‘there are pathological connotations to obsessing over it.’ This is because worrying about the meaning of life is relatively common among people suffering from depression and other psychological problems. Philosophers, however, should not fear being stigmatised, suggests Tartaglia, since there is nevertheless a legitimate *philosophical* version of the question untainted by any such pathological associations—namely: ‘What is the human species for?’ (or, more colloquially, ‘What are we here for?’).⁸⁷ Likewise, in the third paragraph of the book he does not state that there is only *one obvious question* regarding the meaning of life, but rather that ‘there is only one obvious *philosophical* question’ regarding it—and shouldn’t philosophers, at least, be able to tell the difference between a properly *philosophical* question about *intrinsic* or *essential* meaning and value, on the one hand, and a wholly unphilosophical one about mere *personal, social* and *moral* meaning and value on the other?⁸⁸

But apart from the implicit suggestion that the questions people suffering from depression might seek answers to are beneath the concerns of philosophy—a suggestion that is simply staggering in light of the fact that Tartaglia claims that people who are bored are able to divine the true answer to the ultimate question of philosophy and religion simply in virtue of having been left to twiddle their thumbs⁸⁹—it is obviously the case that one will *only* agree with this if one *already* agrees with Tartaglia that philosophy is ‘all about’ the question of the meaning of life in his narrow, crypto-theological sense. But since Tartaglia is the *only* philosopher, to the very best of my knowledge, who has

⁸⁷ Tartaglia (2016), pp. 1–2; cf. Tartaglia (2016a), p. 300.

⁸⁸ Tartaglia (2016), p. 2 (italics added).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–34. Tartaglia argues that boredom has profound philosophical significance because it is not a mere *mood* or *emotion* but rather something more like what Heidegger called a *Grundstimmung* (see, e.g., Heidegger 1929–30/1995): that is, a fundamental ‘attunement’ that is revelatory of ‘the human condition as a whole,’ allowing us ‘to see things more objectively and grasp truths that would otherwise remain hidden’ (pp. 26, 28). What is ‘most significant about boredom from a philosophical perspective,’ writes Tartaglia, ‘is that it naturally orientates us to the truth of nihilism’; that is, that it ‘attunes’ us to the true answer to the fundamental question of both philosophy and religion—that ‘life is meaningless.’ Should such a philosophical attunement tip over into a mere *mood* such as depression, on the other hand, Tartaglia seems to suggest, asking about the meaning of life thereby loses its deep philosophical significance and becomes a shallow, unphilosophical question with ‘pathological connotations’ (pp. 3, 1). Thus a person who feels her life is meaningless is implicitly asking the merely ‘social,’ wholly unphilosophical question, ‘How can I get some more meaning in my life?,’ to which an appropriate response would be to advise her to get a new hobby or join an internet dating agency (p. 3). Tartaglia takes these points to be obvious, and ‘[u]nlike other philosophers,’ he writes in this connection, ‘I do not scorn the obvious’ (p. 3).

ever characterised philosophy in these terms, and he is well aware that the vast majority of philosophers would disagree with him, all his talk about this being ‘the only obvious philosophical question in the area,’ and his scathing rebukes of other philosophers for failing to see (or else scorning) ‘the obvious’—all of this boils down to little more than Tartaglia feeling disgruntled over the fact that people do not share his highly idiosyncratic conception of philosophy.⁹⁰ But then since making the case for the credibility of this conception of philosophy is the principal argumentative burden of Tartaglia’s book, he ought not to have assumed it to be obvious at the outset. Rather, he should have expected to have to *argue* for it, and only expect it to *become* ‘obvious’ to people, if at all, to the extent that his arguments succeed in convincing them. The same goes for his accusation, cited earlier, that those who find the question of the meaning of life ‘obscure, uninteresting or just plain unanswerable’ are purveyors of an ‘anti-philosophical cultural trend,’ and that those who attempt ‘to make philosophy more like science’ are *eo ipso* part of an ‘absurd agenda’ of ‘philosophers turning against philosophy’—in which case, of course, Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant would count not so much as the fathers of modern philosophy as the fathers of modern *anti-philosophy*.⁹¹

4.6 The Meaning of Life: A Cheap Possibility

Since Tartaglia’s appeal to obviousness does not work, then, his case for claiming that what he calls the ‘real’ question of life’s meaning is the only genuinely philosophical one must hinge on the story he has to tell about the history of philosophy. His historical thesis, in a nutshell, is that philosophy got underway when the question of the meaning of human life was first connected to the concept of ‘transcendence.’⁹² It was the prospect that if reality is transcendent there might be ‘a wider context of meaning,’ and thus that nihilism might not be true, that ‘provided the original impetus to philosophical inquiry.’⁹³ Philosophy thus ‘begins in, and remains rooted in,’ what he calls the ‘two

⁹⁰ To get an idea of just how idiosyncratic it is, consider his claims that (all?) ‘[p]hilosophical problems arise from attempts to make sense of the world with the concepts of transcendence, and such attempts are its proper aim,’ and that the history of philosophy has been a perennial debate between two factions, ‘with one side reminding us of the fact of transcendence only to take it in the wrong direction, and the other side trying to deny it’ (ibid., pp. 178, 180).

⁹¹ I explore this point in some detail in another paper currently in progress.

⁹² Ibid., p. 73 and chapter 3 *passim*; Tartaglia (2016a).

⁹³ Tartaglia tells the same story about the origins of religion (2016, e.g., pp. 55, 70, 74, 78).

prototypical concerns’ of the meaning of life and transcendence, and ‘once the connection between them is understood, we have more than enough unity to speak of a distinctive subject-matter of philosophy.’⁹⁴ In short, Tartaglia’s principal metaphilosophical thesis is that ‘concerns about transcendence and the meaning of life’ together ‘provide the unifying core to the subject-matter of philosophy’ and provide it with its ‘distinctive subject-matter.’⁹⁵

Apart from the fact that the few historical examples Tartaglia briefly discusses do not really support his case,⁹⁶ one might have thought that, if these two questions really *did* form the original impetus and *raison d’être* of traditional philosophical inquiry, historians of philosophy might have taken note of this.⁹⁷ But even if we were to accept that the history of philosophy has been in some sense ‘all about’ the question of the meaning of life in Tartaglia’s crypto-theological sense, the trouble is that it follows from other things he says that the entire history of philosophy must have been motivated by a literally irrational, ill-motivated, ‘cheap’ possibility: namely, *the possibility that there is a connection between the question of the meaning of life and the question of transcendence*. For just as he often says he can think of literally ‘no reason’ to think there might be a transcendent context of meaning, so he also says, with regard to the possibility of a connection between transcendence and meaning, that ‘there is no reason to link the two, since there is no reason a transcendent context should be a context of meaning.’ Although the idea that reality might have some ‘overall purpose’ is not ‘conceptually ruled out,’ he writes, ‘we have no good reason to believe in it either’:

For even if the physical universe does exist within a transcendent context, there is no reason this should be a context of meaning, or one in which human life has an overall purpose. All this is possible, but *possibility is cheap*.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 69–70.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 73, 76.

⁹⁶ I cannot substantiate this claim here, but attempt to do so in a paper currently in preparation.

⁹⁷ Tartaglia does not cite any accounts of the history of philosophy to support his case in the book. However, in a more recent article, by way of pre-empting the objection that ‘philosophy has typically not shown much interest in the meaning of life,’ he cites Julian Young’s *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life* (2003). That Young’s book might not entirely support Tartaglia’s case, however, is suggested by the statement in its opening paragraph that ‘[f]or most of our Western history we have not talked about the meaning of life’ (p. 1).

⁹⁸ Tartaglia (2016), p. 52 (italics in original).

In light of all that Tartaglia has to say about how philosophy got underway once the question of the meaning of life was connected to the question of transcendence, and how the connection between the two ‘provides the unifying core to the subject matter of philosophy’ and so on, this is quite a bewildering conclusion for him to have embraced. And yet in the final chapter of the book he goes further, letting us know just *how* cheap he thinks this possibility really is. For here we find him arguing that although it is *possible* there could be a connection between the question of the meaning of life and transcendence—the two questions which, again, he has been telling us all along together comprise the ‘unifying core’ of philosophy—this is only an idle or empty conceptual possibility on a par with the possibility ‘that Heidegger’s death was faked and that he lives on as the world’s oldest man; but nobody with any sense would feel the need to rule *that* out. Possibility, as I said before, is cheap.’⁹⁹

So, at the end of the book we find Tartaglia ridiculing and trivialising the question which, at the start of the book, he told us was the most profound and important question a human being can ask; a question that he had told us is ‘as serious as your life’; the ‘keystone of philosophy,’ no less; the question that ‘locks the rest of its traditional preoccupations in place’ and without which those preoccupations ‘fall apart and fragment, losing the form that makes them credible.’¹⁰⁰

It would seem to follow, then, that the entire history of philosophy and religion—and science, too, inasmuch as it lacked self-consciousness about its proper role and was thus guided by a ‘confused quest’¹⁰¹—has been based upon little more than a rationally unmotivated, idle, *cheap* conceptual possibility. And yet Tartaglia implores philosophers to embrace and ‘reclaim’ this same cheap possibility as their own, to officially acknowledge it as the original impetus and unifying core of their discipline, in order to restore philosophy’s self-consciousness and self-confidence, and to re-establish its cultural voice.¹⁰² To steal a line from Tartaglia’s review of Metz’s book: could it be that ‘something has gone wrong’?

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 171 (italics in original).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 174 and chapter 8 *passim*.

¹⁰² Tartaglia (2016a).

5. Why *this* Question, Again?

So why *is* it, finally, that Tartaglia insists upon the absolute centrality of this question—a question that, as we have seen above, turns out to be not only crypto-theological and scientifically obsolete, but also based upon a possibility that even Tartaglia himself regards as rationally unmotivated, idle, and ‘cheap’? Why would he go to such lengths to argue that the question of the ‘overall meaning’ of human life—understood in the narrow and specific sense of whether there might be a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe—is ‘the keystone of philosophy’? Why would he claim that this question has always been the essential, defining question of philosophy, and that it should remain so today, when he himself rejects the question’s core premise? Why does he insist upon the crucial significance of this question for philosophy’s future when he thinks the answer to it is so obvious, so trivial, so anodyne, and so lacking in consequences that he can simply take it for granted that the reader will agree? Why does he implore philosophers to explicitly embrace this question as their own when he thinks it has long since been definitively resolved, and has no interest in the arguments of those who accept its basic premise? And finally, why does he assert that our lives are ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ simply because there is no reason to believe in an extra-cosmic, supernatural purpose for the universe’s existence? A fully satisfying answer to these questions would take us far beyond the scope of this paper. However, a few things can be said that will help to make ‘overall sense’ of it.

We have seen above that Tartaglia would like to revitalise or reinvigorate philosophy, and help it to ‘regain its own distinctive cultural voice,’ by returning it to what he regards as its roots—that is, to the natural sources of human interest from which it originated, and which continue to draw people to it today. We have also seen that he thinks that this natural source of human interest is best encapsulated by the question, ‘What is the meaning of life?’, where this is understood to be equivalent to asking ‘What are we here for?’ or ‘Why do human beings exist?’ It is because analytic philosophers over the past century or so have ignored, dismissed and even denigrated this question that Tartaglia regards them as part of a ‘tragicomic’ and ‘absurd agenda’ of ‘philosophers turning against philosophy,’ this itself being part of what he sees as a wider

‘anti-philosophical cultural trend.’¹⁰³ Such philosophers typically dismiss or disparage the question because it is supposedly ‘obscure, uninteresting, or just plain unanswerable,’ but Tartaglia suspects that the intellectual dominance of science, combined with deeper psychological anxieties regarding religion and nihilism, are what really lie behind this absurd and tragicomic spectacle.¹⁰⁴ But in distancing themselves from the question of the meaning of life, argues Tartaglia, philosophers have distanced themselves not from religion, but from the essential motivating impetus and core subject matter of *philosophy itself*.¹⁰⁵

To make matters worse, even those philosophers who *have* addressed the question of the meaning of life over the past century have entirely missed the point of the question as properly understood. Instead of addressing the *real* question of the meaning of human life, the question that Tartaglia thinks human beings ‘have been asking since at least the beginning of civilisation’—that is, the ‘deep, natural and ancient question’ of why the human species exists—they have addressed an entirely different question, one that is ‘a relatively recent cultural product,’ and which wholly lacks the philosophical depth, scope and significance of the original. In short, such philosophers have substituted for the venerable question of why the human species exists a question that is not a genuinely *philosophical* question at all: namely, the question of meaning *in* life, or *social* meaning.¹⁰⁶ Such philosophers think that, by ignoring the traditional question of the meaning of life in favour of a wholly distinct set of issues about the conditions of a meaningful life in a social or moral sense, they are bringing philosophy closer to the supposedly more intellectually reputable concerns of science. But Tartaglia thinks this is a fatal mistake. For in trying to align philosophy with what he regards as the wholly incommensurable concerns proper to science, rather than the original motivating concerns he thinks philosophy shares with religion, Tartaglia argues that such philosophers are only helping to drive philosophy itself ever further into cultural oblivion.

Should philosophers follow Tartaglia’s lead in explicitly embracing the question of the meaning of life as the defining core of their discipline, on the other hand, they would be able to carve out an autonomous space for philosophical inquiry entirely un beholden to the misguided metaphysical

¹⁰³ Tartaglia (2016), p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, e.g., p. 11: ‘In backing away from a meaning of life, then, philosophers have inadvertently been backing away not from religion but from philosophy.’

¹⁰⁶ Tartaglia (2015); (2015a); (2016), chapter 1 *passim*; (2016a).

pretensions of the natural sciences. This would not only make it clear, to both philosophers and others, ‘what philosophy is all about,’ and provide a clear line of demarcation between the concerns of philosophy and those of science; it would also provide philosophy with the kind of self-consciousness and self-confidence it so sorely lacks, thereby enabling it to ‘reclaim its centre,’ ‘regain its own distinctive cultural voice,’ and ‘bear weight in an intellectual culture dominated by science.’¹⁰⁷

This much explains why Tartaglia thinks the question of the meaning of life is so important, why he seems so annoyed with much of contemporary philosophy, and with what he calls the ‘new paradigm’ approach to the question of life’s meaning in particular. But why does Tartaglia insist that the question of the meaning of life must be understood in connection with what he calls ‘transcendence,’ such that for our lives to be meaningful ‘there would have to be a wider context of meaning beyond the physical universe, on which the existence of the physical universe depended’? For Tartaglia is putting it *very* mildly indeed when he says that this ‘might be thought an overly strong requirement,’¹⁰⁸ and I have been suggesting throughout this paper that he has provided nothing in the way of a cogent argument for why the question must be restricted in this way. To say that our lives are meaningless because there is no such ‘transcendent context of meaning’ is gratuitous hyperbole at best. Moreover, we have seen above that even Tartaglia himself regards the possibility of such a context to be a cheap, idle and rationally unmotivated one. So let us ask, one more time: why does he insist upon *this* question?

In order to provide an adequate answer to our question, I think, there is a piece of the puzzle that still needs to be added. For *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* comprises not only a *metaphilosophical* thesis about the nature of philosophy, but also a *metaphysical* thesis about the nature of reality itself.¹⁰⁹ Though I have only been able to explore some aspects of the former thesis in this paper, I suspect it is because he wants to forge a connection between these two theses that he insists upon formulating the question of the meaning of life in the way that he does. For, in a nutshell, Tartaglia argues that there *is* a wider

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 11, 9, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰⁹ Roughly speaking, the first three chapters are devoted to the metaphilosophical thesis indicated by the main title of the book, the next four to the metaphysical one indicated by the subtitle of the book, with the two being brought together in the final chapter, where Tartaglia makes a case for what he thinks the future of philosophy ought to look like in light of the conclusions of the previous chapters.

context of existence beyond the physical universe after all, and that this wider context of existence, upon which the existence of the physical universe depends, is nothing other than *consciousness*.¹¹⁰ And to cut a long story short, Tartaglia thinks he has found a way to utilise his metaphysical thesis about the transcendence of consciousness to secure an autonomous space for a priori philosophical inquiry and to fortify it against the unwanted incursions of natural science. For within this sheltered space Tartaglia imagines that philosophers might be able to keep consciousness to themselves, to cup their palms around the flame of human essence, as it were, and press on with the fundamental task of philosophy—that of ‘tending the space of transcendence.’¹¹¹ Moreover, since the physical universe that is the proper concern of science *has no independent existence* but rather *depends upon consciousness*, it is these philosophers of transcendence who get to have the ultimate say about the true nature of reality.¹¹² Scientists, on the other hand—as well as philosophical naturalists who misguidedly take the physical universe as the final context of existence—should be persuaded to leave such questions well alone; for not only do they have no expertise in metaphysics, and so make a botched job of it when they try, but since they are guided by a ‘confused quest’ for ultimate meaning that does not exist, they may well end up doing something with disastrous consequences.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 105. This is a *slight* oversimplification in that Tartaglia also maintains that consciousness itself belongs to a *final* context of reality-in-itself. Whether Tartaglia’s premises entitle him to infer that there *is* any transcendent reality apart from consciousness is not a matter I can take up here, but it seems the only reason he introduces it is that he thinks it exculpates him from the charge of idealism.

¹¹¹ On the task of philosophy as that of ‘tending the space of transcendence’ see p. 83 and chapter 8 *passim*. I owe the palm-cupping metaphor to Collins (2001), p. 279.

¹¹² Even if, as Tartaglia also maintains, all they can ever hope to accurately say about it is ‘that it is transcendent’ (see, e.g., pp. 117–120, and p. 163).

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 174. One such disastrous consequence—besides the possibility that scientists might recreate the conditions of the Big Bang, discover the elixir of life, or inadvertently invite alien civilisations to invade—would be that they might ‘reverse engineer consciousness’ (ibid.). That Tartaglia thinks this is a real possibility might lead one to question whether he really believes his own story about the extra-physical, transcendent nature of consciousness. For if science *could* reverse engineer consciousness, in the sense of actually *building* creatures whose behaviour would be indistinguishable from that of conscious human beings, how can he maintain that science *can never explain consciousness in physical terms*? Here I suspect Tartaglia would play the ‘zombie card,’ and claim that it would be *metaphysically impossible* for such *merely physical* beings to have *real* consciousness, no matter *how* indistinguishable they might be from *really* conscious beings like ourselves. That philosophers allow their intuitions about what ‘the merely physical’ is capable of do so much of their metaphysical heavy-lifting, and have little more to offer than blatantly circular and question-begging arguments in their defence (‘Imagine you knew everything there is to know about *the physical world*, but...’ or ‘Imagine *the physical world* remains unchanged, but...’), has long baffled me—even if, as I argue in work in progress, such intuitions are perfectly ‘natural,’ and can be explained in terms of the auto-epistemic limitations of our neurocognitive architecture (*inter alia*).

An extra bonus from Tartaglia's point of view is that, when it comes to the ultimate nature of reality, religious and 'spiritual' people turn out to have latched onto a profound insight—for there really is a 'transcendent context of existence,' as they had assumed all along. All they were *wrong* about was their assumption that this context is also a context of *meaning*.¹¹⁴ However, since philosophy is *all about* transcendence, it follows that religious and spiritual people 'evidence more philosophical acumen' than naturalists and scientists who think they have good reasons for ruling out such a supernatural 'beyond.'¹¹⁵ For when it comes to the ultimate nature of reality, while religious and spiritual people have been at least *half right*—after all, they *knew all along* that *real* reality was something that *transcends the physical universe*—naturalists and (atheist) scientists, in taking the physical universe to be all that there is, are *altogether wrong*. For as we discover when we arrive at Tartaglia's 'Transcendent Hypothesis,' the entire physical universe turns out to be something that only exists within a 'context of existence' that is *created by consciousness*.¹¹⁶

Thus the reason that Tartaglia insists upon the specific form of the question of life's meaning that he does, I would suggest, is not because it makes best sense of the history of Western philosophy (which it doesn't), nor that it explains the origins of the various kinds of religious beliefs people have held throughout history (which it does even less). Rather, it is because he thinks he has found a solution to the problem of consciousness, and hopes that his solution, since it places consciousness *beyond the physical universe altogether*, might also provide the answer to the ultimate question of both philosophy and religion. In particular, he thinks it explains why people all over the world, and throughout human history, have supposed there must be more to the world than physical reality; why they have always supposed that 'true reality' must be *transcendent* in some sense, existing *beyond* the physical world. And the reason it explains this, he thinks, is that it demonstrates *that they were right*.

Unfortunately for Tartaglia's overall thesis, however, the links he manages to forge between the problem of the meaning of life, on the one hand, and the problem of consciousness on the other—even with a whole lot of skilful

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 183.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 191 n. 19. He does add a parenthetical '*ceteris paribus*' lest he be taken to be crediting Deepak Chopra or Rick Warren with greater 'philosophical acumen' than Bertrand Russell or W.V.O. Quine. (Though, come to think of it, it may well be that he *would* so credit them.)

¹¹⁶ Sometimes Tartaglia says that the physical universe 'exists within consciousness' (p. 105), at others that it exists 'within a context created by consciousness' (p. 178).

gerrymandering—are quite tenuous. When one gets to the chapters on consciousness and transcendence, it at least becomes clear why he had insisted upon formulating the question of the meaning of life in the idiosyncratic terms of the possibility that there might be a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe. For Tartaglia’s ‘problem of consciousness’ is a matter of *how consciousness can belong to the physical world*, and since he cannot understand how it *could* belong to it, he concludes that it *doesn’t* belong there at all. Rather, it *transcends* the physical world. And yet since the physical world *presents itself within* consciousness, and since consciousness cannot possibly exist *within the world that it presents*, it follows that the physical world itself must exist in some sense *within* consciousness. To believe that consciousness depends upon the brain within the world it presents in waking life, argues Tartaglia, would be as absurd as to suppose that it belongs to the brain within the world it presents in a dream. The sense in which the physical world exists within consciousness, then, is the same as the sense in which the world of a dream exists within consciousness: it is a ‘context of existence’ which consciousness *creates*. Consciousness itself, on the other hand, belongs to a transcendent context of existence that is *not* created by consciousness, but is rather the final, ultimate context of reality-in-itself. So, if people have always believed in a reality that transcends the physical world, and if the ultimate, founding question of both philosophy and religion is the question of the meaning of life, where this is understood in terms of the possibility that there might be a transcendent context of reality that would provide a reason for the existence of the universe, and thereby also a meaning to human existence, could it be that Tartaglia has solved the ultimate problem of both philosophy and religion—the most profound question of natural human concern?¹¹⁷

Well, I expect this at least clarifies how the two issues are supposed to be connected, and I suggest that this goes a long way towards explaining why Tartaglia insists upon the form of the question of the meaning of life that he does. For any such metaphysically audacious hypotheses as these, of course, the hazards are myriad and the hurdles gargantuan. Indeed, the puzzles to which Tartaglia’s proposed *solution* to the problem of consciousness gives rise make the problem itself look altogether simple by comparison. To restrict myself here to the issue of how Tartaglia attempts to forge the aforementioned connections,

¹¹⁷ On all this see chapters 4 and 5 especially.

we can already discern several loose threads that might unravel the fabric of the would-be system. For although Tartaglia claims that the question of consciousness is motivated by the question of transcendence, he does not in fact formulate the question in these terms at all. Rather, what he calls ‘transcendence’ is his *answer* to the problem of consciousness, a problem which he formulates on quite other grounds: namely, as mentioned above, in terms of the question of how consciousness could ‘belong to’ the physical world.¹¹⁸ Similarly, although he claims that his ‘Transcendent Hypothesis’ denies that there is a ‘transcendent context of meaning,’ and, in thus revealing the truth of nihilism, ‘reveals that one important source of psychological need for meaning is a straightforward mistake,’¹¹⁹ the hypothesis in question, to the extent that it is not simply orthogonal to these issues, would seem rather to favour the idea that there *is* a transcendent context of meaning. For if it were indeed the case, as Tartaglia’s hypothesis would have it, that our consciousness *creates the physical world*, it is hard to see how this could *fail* to make our lives meaningful—for it would seem to make us gods, and each human mind a kind of demiurge. Moreover, since Tartaglia endorses Einstein’s view that without consciousness the entire universe would be ‘nothing but a pile of dirt,’¹²⁰ it seems he is committed to saying that consciousness is not only the ‘transcendent context’ within which the universe exists, but also *the transcendent source of all meaning and value*. Why then, we might wonder, is *consciousness itself* not a ‘transcendent context of meaning’?¹²¹ And to these two problems one could easily add dozens of others no less serious; some considerably more so.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 83ff.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 170, 171.

¹²⁰ As reported by Feigl (1967), p. 138; cited by Tartaglia (2016), p. 85. Feigl tells us that the German word Einstein actually used was more ‘uncouth’ than the English word ‘dirt.’

¹²¹ Far from recognising any such implication, Tartaglia’s official position is that realising that the physical universe depends upon and exists within our own minds does not and cannot even ‘put human life in a new perspective’ (see, e.g., pp. 170, 172). Rather, he thinks that realising that the physical universe is ‘not an independent being’ but rather ‘exists within a context created by consciousness’ ought to lead to ‘a relative quietism on ontological issues’ (p. 178). He also denies that his position amounts to any kind of idealism, but in view of his claims that the physical universe ‘exists within consciousness’ (p. 105), that the ‘world of physical things, like electrons, tables, and planets’ is only a ‘representational posit’ (pp. 165–6), and that consciousness ‘is not dependent on the brain’ (p. 113), I do not find his denials altogether convincing.

¹²² I intend to address some of these problems, especially with regard to Tartaglia’s proposed solution to the problem of consciousness, elsewhere. It may be worth adding here that a deeper reason why Tartaglia links the problems of consciousness and the meaning of life may be that he apparently thinks both nihilism and the transcendence of consciousness become obvious if we simply reflect upon what a *wholly physical reality* would be like. Thus he says that the ‘quickest and easiest way’ to see the truth

6. Conclusion

It is often said that in philosophy it is more important to ask the right questions than to arrive at the right answers, and though I have found much to take issue with regarding to Tartaglia's way of construing the question of the meaning of life, I do think he has raised important metaphilosophical issues that philosophers all too rarely address. Indeed, I even think there is *something* to the suggestion that philosophy has its origins in questions regarding 'the meaning of life'—at least if that is construed in a suitably broad sense. For many philosophical questions are indeed deeply rooted in natural sources of human curiosity about the world, and about the place of human beings within it. It is also true that human beings have always tried to make sense of things by placing their lives within a larger context, narrative, worldview or explanatory framework. Thus, if we allow that in searching for the 'overall meaning' of life people might be seeking to place their lives, and by extension human life as whole, within a broader context or explanatory framework—a framework within which to make sense of the world as a whole, and of their own place within it—then I think Tartaglia is quite right: the question of the meaning of human life, *in this maximally broad sense*, is indeed a matter of profound human concern, wonder and curiosity. Throughout human history such overarching explanatory frameworks have taken a wide variety of different forms. From the fabulous mythological narratives of our prehistoric ancestors through the simple anthropomorphic cosmologies of the world religions to the breathtakingly sophisticated 'theories of everything' of contemporary theoretical physics and cosmology, the human urge for global or all-embracing explanation and understanding is undeniable. Also undeniable is that many of philosophy's perennial problems have their roots in this drive to make maximal sense of the world. Indeed, it is this aspiration for all-encompassing explanation and understanding that is so well captured by Wilfrid Sellars's characterisation of the aim of philosophy as that of understanding 'how things in the broadest possible

of nihilism is 'to retreat to a physical perspective, and think of human life as consisting in bodies moving around and making noises' (p. 25). As it turns out, this is also essentially the *same* route whereby he arrives at the conclusion that consciousness cannot 'belong to the physical world' (see pp. 83–85 especially). It would therefore appear that both Tartaglia's nihilism and his 'Transcendent Hypothesis' rest upon his conviction that the physical universe is a *zombie universe*, in the sense popularised by David Chalmers. That this conviction is supported by little more than a hopelessly impoverished conception of 'the physical' is a claim I defend at length in work currently in progress.

sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’—a characterisation of philosophy that I have long favoured.¹²³

Where I disagree with Tartaglia is that I see no reason to tether this natural human curiosity and drive for explanation to any particular question about a value-conferring reason for our existence, much less to any supposed natural yearning for a ‘transcendent context of meaning’ beyond the physical universe, one that might ward off the threat of nihilism and provide human life with value and purpose. Even as a hypothesis about the origins of Western philosophy, this does not withstand serious scrutiny, and it is even less credible with regard to the origins of the world’s religions. Moreover, if we interpret the question of ‘the meaning of life’ in the broader sense I have sketched above—that is, in terms of the search for an all-inclusive context, narrative, worldview, or explanatory framework within which to ‘make sense of things’ in the broadest possible sense of these terms—we could avoid several problems with which Tartaglia’s interpretation of the question would seem to be hampered. First, we would respect the original linguistic form of the question, and use the expression ‘meaning of *x*’ in the way that I have suggested it is most commonly used, without having to substitute ‘value,’ ‘purpose’ or ‘significance’ in its place, as if these were all synonymous. This would have the added advantage that overall *meaning* would not be confused, as is the case with Tartaglia’s construal of the question, with distinct concerns regarding *value*.¹²⁴ Second, the question would not only be asking (*inter alia*) about our *origins* (‘Why are we here?’), but also about our *fate* (‘Where are we heading?’), both in terms of our individual lives and the human species itself. These are questions that surely *have* always been central to the human quest for meaning, yet ones that Tartaglia’s formulation of the question would appear to sideline—and even, at times, trivialise.¹²⁵ Third,

¹²³ Sellars (1963), p. 1.

¹²⁴ Though Tartaglia claims that the conflation of *social* meaning and value with *intrinsic* meaning and value is a ‘straightforward mistake,’ he also says, as we have seen, that *life is worthless* and admits that ‘worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them’ (2016, p. 171). On my alternative construal of the question, however, there would be no need to insist upon a dubiously coherent metaphysical distinction between ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘social value,’ one that is ‘endlessly conflated in our culture’ and which people would need to take courses in Tartaglian metaphysics to understand, since life’s ‘overall meaning’ would not be synonymous with its value in *any* sense of the word.

¹²⁵ Although Tartaglia does talk about death in the context of his discussion of time in chapter 6, in the earlier chapters where he formulates his ‘real’ question of the meaning of life, it scarcely figures. Unlike boredom, which Tartaglia tells us is a profound philosophical significance to the question of the meaning of life, he tells us in a note to his Introduction that ‘fear of death’—which one might think even *more* relevant to the question—‘does not impress me: “whaddya gonna do?,”’ as Tony Soprano

there would be no reason to restrict the range of possible *answers* to the question to those that make a rationally and empirically unmotivated appeal to a supernatural being beyond the physical universe, thereby leaving us with a stark and unappealing choice between either theism or nihilism. Rather, we would see that the physical universe itself is a context within which we can make sense of our lives—where we have come from, where we might be heading, and where we *ought* to be heading—based upon genuine (albeit defeasible) knowledge rather than the divisive dogmas of irrationally held belief (or ‘faith’). And finally, we would also have no reason to say that human life is ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ on the dubiously coherent, crypto-theological grounds that we have no ‘intrinsic value,’ where this would mean something like ‘divinely bestowed’ or ‘God-given’ value.

Of course, it could be that Tartaglia simply *likes the sound of* the idea that everybody’s life is meaningless and worthless, just as he tells us that he describes himself as a nihilist because ‘I like the sound of it.’¹²⁶ However, given that more than 800,000 people end their own lives every year (which works out as about one suicide every 40 seconds), and that one of the most frequently cited reasons they do so is that they feel their lives are meaningless and worthless, Tartaglia might want to think twice about the wisdom of being seen to lend intellectual legitimacy and academic respectability to this sentiment. Tartaglia would qualify this, of course, as he does in his book, by saying that this is no sense an *evaluation*, and that he is talking about *metaphysically necessary, essential and intrinsic* value, not mere ‘social value,’ or value in any ‘socially contextual sense.’¹²⁷ But even if Tartaglia can show that this distinction is coherent and important, if he wants people to construe the question of the meaning of life in the way he does, on the grounds that this is supposedly *what the words mean, or how they are typically used*—that is, if he still wants to maintain this in the teeth of the many objections raised above—then he ought also to take into account what the words *meaningless* and *worthless* mean, and how *they* are typically used. For however much he might go on to qualify his message that people’s lives are meaningless and worthless with talk of the supposedly irreducible difference between ‘intrinsic’ value, on the one hand, and

would say’ (p. 185 n. 11).

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 7. Apart from his day job as a professional philosopher, Tartaglia is also an exceptionally talented jazz musician. However, I would urge him not to allow his aesthetic tastes (i.e., what he ‘likes the sound of’) to guide his metaphysical commitments.

¹²⁷ Ibid., e.g., pp. 6, 56, 171, and the discussion in section 4.3 above.

‘social’ value on the other, from the point of view of ordinary language this is simply irrelevant. For from the point of view of how these words are used in *all* domains of life (beyond, perhaps, a few scattered philosophy seminar rooms), to say that a person’s life is ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ simply *is* to condemn their lives—it is to condemn them as *not worth living*.¹²⁸ And if philosophy is to ‘regain its own distinctive voice,’ I hardly think that this is the message it ought to be conveying as the culmination of more than two and a half millennia of philosophical wisdom—even if Tartaglia does regard it as philosophy’s greatest triumph.¹²⁹

In response to this last point, Tartaglia might argue, as he does in the book, that even if widespread belief that life is meaningless and worthless *were* to have ruinous social, moral or psychological consequences, nihilism can hardly be held to blame. After all, nihilism is ‘just a neutral fact,’ and regardless of what the consequences might turn out to be if everyone came to realise the truth, it is no less *true* for all that. For it is still *a fact*, and a profoundly significant one to boot.¹³⁰ But nihilism, in Tartaglia’s sense, is not a ‘fact’ at all, not even a ‘philosophical fact.’ To say that human life, including the lives of each and every individual human being, is *meaningless* and *worthless* because there is no supernatural ‘context of meaning’ is gratuitous hyperbole at best. It no more follows from the fact that there is no divinely preordained ‘meaning of life’ that *life is meaningless* than it follows from the fact that there is no divinely preordained morality that there can be *no morality at all*. To declare that life is meaningless and worthless on these grounds is nothing other than what Nietzsche called a ‘pathological inference’ from loss of belief in an ideal ‘transcendent’ world existing somehow ‘beyond the physical universe,’ a belief which entails devaluation of *this* world as ‘merely physical.’¹³¹ This is the sort of ‘ideal world’ that today’s so-called ‘religious martyrs’ or ‘suicide bombers’ are hoping to escape to when they trigger their ‘sacred explosions’ in crowded public places. But then if this life is truly meaningless, worthless and insignificant; if ‘the life of this world,’ as the Qur’an has it, ‘is nothing but a fleeting vanity,’ ‘a sport and a pastime,’ ‘a show and an empty boast,’ and if

¹²⁸ Again, Tartaglia readily concedes this when he says that ‘worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them’ (ibid., p. 171).

¹²⁹ Ibid., e.g., pp. 74–76.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

¹³¹ Nietzsche (1883–1888/1968), pp. 9, 11, 14, 35 and *passim*.

eternal paradise awaits the martyr in the hereafter, who can blame them?¹³² Given this, and the suicide rates mentioned above, would it really be such a good idea for philosophers to publicly embrace ‘the question of the meaning of life’ as their special domain of expertise, and then, having had their self-confidence and distinctive cultural voice restored, declare that life is indeed ‘meaningless,’ ‘worthless’ and ‘insignificant’?

Nihilism, then, understood as the ‘philosophical fact’ that all human life is meaningless, worthless, aimless and insignificant is not a ‘useful label’ for ‘an important philosophical position,’ as Tartaglia would have it. It is, rather, as his imaginary interlocutor puts it, ‘a philosophical dead-end.’ Indeed, even this may be giving it too much credit. For just as Tartaglia says that questions regarding ‘social meaning’ and the meaningfulness of people’s individual lives ‘do not strike me as terribly philosophical,’ so do I fail to find much that is of philosophical (rather than *theological*) significance in his ‘real’ question of the meaning of life.¹³³ For if philosophy aims to understand ‘how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term,’ the broadest possible context we have, and ever *will* have, is that of the physical universe.¹³⁴ And contrary to Tartaglia’s claim that only a supernatural or ‘transcendent’ context could bestow ‘overall meaning’ upon human life, it seems to me that placing our lives in the context of human history, human history in the context of the evolution of life on earth, and life on earth in the context of cosmological evolution, can provide considerable meaning to our lives, both individually and collectively. For we thereby come to understand our real origins, and our intimate biological kinship with all living things on earth.¹³⁵

¹³² See, e.g., Qur’an 2: 86, 190–3, 212, 216; 3: 167–9, 195–8; 4: 74, 95; 6: 32, 70; 7: 51; 9: 38–9, 73, 81, 85–9, 111; 10: 7–8; 11: 15–6; 13: 26; 14: 3; 16: 107–9; 17: 18–9; 22: 58–60; 29: 64; 40: 39; 42: 36; 47: 36; 57: 20; 76: 27; 79: 38–39. Such lines as those quoted here are a frequent refrain in the Qur’an, which is clear that only unbelievers rejoice in this life (and that they will suffer eternal torture for it in hellfire). I have quoted here from Dawood’s translation (1990): see, e.g., pp. 58, 283, 359, 382–3.

¹³³ Tartaglia (2016), pp. 7, 4.

¹³⁴ I say this notwithstanding the fact that Tartaglia takes himself to have established, in the space of eight short paragraphs of a priori reasoning, that consciousness transcends the physical universe (*ibid.*, pp. 83–85). Regarding the definite article here (‘*the* physical universe’) I do not mean to rule out ‘multiverse’ hypotheses in contemporary cosmology, nor Everettian interpretations of quantum mechanics. Rather, I am using the term ‘universe’ in its maximally inclusive sense, such that if it turns out that what we now call ‘the universe’ is only one among many, these too would count as part of ‘the universe’ in the relevant sense. As for my contention that we *never will* have a broader context than the physical universe within which to make sense of things, this should be taken as a hypothesis or prediction strongly supported by enumerative induction over the history of science (cf. Melnyk 2003, pp. 256ff).

¹³⁵ On the truly surprising extent of this kinship see, e.g., Carroll (2005).

We also come to learn that we are, in a sense, ‘special’ after all. We are special in that the Earth is very far from being a typical part of space, or even a typical sort of planet. Rather, it is an extraordinarily rich and multifarious planet, upon which that most curious of all things—life itself—has evolved and proliferated. For whether one regards life as a blessing or a curse, a gift for which to be thankful or a condition to be endured, there can be little doubting its remarkable *scarcity* in the universe at large.¹³⁶ And we human beings, though only one among many species of animal life, are also special—not least in that we have evolved the ability to collaboratively develop, refine and expand our knowledge, and to provide empirically supported answers to questions about the universe as a whole, and our place within it. Whether one prefers to think of this in terms of ‘the universe coming to know itself through man,’ or in less metaphysically inflated terms, it is quite capable of providing ‘overall meaning’ to our lives.

We also come to learn, of course, that we are finite—that, to quote Bertrand Russell, ‘no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave’—but that this too can make our lives *more* rather than less meaningful. For we thereby come to realise that *this* life is the only one we have, or ever will have, and that there is no *other* life with respect to which it even *makes sense* to say that *this* one is ‘meaningless’ or ‘worthless.’ We come to learn likewise that we humans are but one among countless millions of biological species, and that we too, like so many before us, will ultimately be faced with annihilation—‘that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction...’ Indeed, in view of the many existential threats or ‘global catastrophic risks’ already looming on the horizon—many of them, of course, anthropogenic in origin—it seems increasingly likely that we will be forced to confront this possibility sooner rather than later; if not in the present century, at least a whole lot sooner than Russell’s ‘vast death of the solar system.’¹³⁷ But just as we can do things to try to ward off an early death, and to extend our individual lives, so too can we face up to the threats that face our species, and the many species with which we still share the planet, and arrive at rational, scientifically informed decisions about how best to respond to them.

¹³⁶ Regarding the distribution of planets in space this is unassailable (cf. Deutsch 2011, pp. 42ff.). Regarding the probable distribution of complex life on other planets it also remains the default position in astrobiology and evolutionary biology (see, e.g., Davies 2010 and Lane 2015). For a robust and philosophically sophisticated challenge to the conventional wisdom see Ćirković (2012).

¹³⁷ Russell (1917), p. 41. See, e.g., Bostrom & Ćirković (2008) and Bostrom (2013).

Such a naturalistic perspective on the meaning of life is unlikely to provide the kind of comfort that many people desire, or else have learnt to take for granted; the kind of comfort an infant might feel in knowing that a benevolent parent is watching out for them and will protect them come what may. And for those who think of the meaning of life as a kind of story—and this includes the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived—the ending may provide little solace or consolation of the kind that religions have traditionally provided. But the meaning of life we are talking about here is, at the end of the day, the only kind worth having; for it is the kind that is based upon genuine knowledge rather than myth, superstition, or wishful fantasy.¹³⁸ And notwithstanding Tartaglia’s intuitions and arguments to the contrary, the physical universe not only provides a fathomlessly rich and endlessly fascinating context within which to make sense of our lives, but—as I intend to argue in future publications—it also readily accommodates human consciousness.¹³⁹

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¹³⁸ Just prior to sending this paper off for publication, upon belatedly remembering to cite Daniel Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* in note 3, I realised that I may well have been ‘unconsciously channelling’ a line from that book in this sentence (cf. Dennett 1995, p. p. 22). What alerted me to this was Dennett’s subtitle, which I had completely forgotten: *Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. The first reference to the meaning of life in the Index (p. 571) directed me to page 22, where I read: ‘the only meaning of life worth caring about is one that can withstand our best efforts to examine it.’

¹³⁹ Many thanks to Ray Brassier and Thaddaeus Metz for reading an earlier draft of this paper and making some valuable suggestions for amendments. Had I been able to carry out radical amputative and reconstructive surgery of the kind Ray recommended, I have no doubt it would have been a whole lot better, and considerably more succinct. To paraphrase a quote variously attributed to Blaise Pascal, Mark Twain, and Winston Churchill, among others: if only I’d had more time I would have written something shorter. I would also like to sincerely thank the editor of the journal, Professor Masahiro Morioka, for accepting such a long paper for publication. I dedicate the paper in gratitude to James Tartaglia for recommending me as a contributor to this symposium, in spite of the fact that he was well aware of how strongly I disagreed with his views. This, it seems to me, betrays the sort of character and magnanimity to which any would-be philosopher ought to aspire. Ironically, perhaps, this invitation has helped to restore some meaning and purpose to my own life after several years of ill-health, unemployment, and freelance editorial drudgery. Unrelenting criticism may seem a discourteous way to show one’s gratitude, but I trust James will understand what drives me, and accept the paper in the spirit it was written—one best captured by an ancient saying attributed to Aristotle: *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*.

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