

Reply to Damian Veal

James Tartaglia*

Damian Veal's paper has a clear overall narrative: it takes the form of an investigation into why I ask the question of the meaning of life, despite the fact that I do not think there is one, and why I insist upon (Veal's context) or argue (the book's context, I maintain) that this question is central to philosophical inquiry. This is presented as a mystery, the solution to which requires a painstaking assemblage of all the clues. In the penultimate section, entitled, 'Why *this* Question, again?', Veal announces the result of his investigation. Here is what he says:

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. 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 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*. 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. (pp. 246-7)

This is the culmination of his narrative. Afterwards, there is no time for him to say where I went wrong (I engaged in a 'whole lot of skilful gerrymandering' (pp.

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248-9)), and so he instead proceeds to allow his criticisms to become quite extreme, thankfully only for a short while, before finally providing his own, positive take on the question of the meaning of life; a question hitherto disparaged at every step. Veal's main investigation was successful, however, because I did indeed write a book which connects the question of the meaning of life with a thesis about consciousness and the nature of philosophy. The final chapter is called 'Nihilism, Transcendence and Philosophy'; 'Nihilism' is my answer to the meaning of life question, and 'Transcendence' pertains to my accounts of consciousness and the nature of philosophy. But I did not save this connection for the last chapter. Rather I said exactly what I was going to do in the introduction, and then proceeded to argue for my position throughout the book. So I can only conclude that the investigative narrative of Veal's paper is really just a dramatic device, employed to allow him to hold the whole of my book up the incredulous, disapproving stares which he seems to imagine whenever he quotes me; which is a lot.

Still, I think I can see his underlying concern. Veal thinks the question of the meaning of life is ambiguous and can be interpreted in many different ways. He thinks I have chosen a particular interpretation simply because it ties in with my account of consciousness; and that this is not a good reason for side-lining alternative interpretations. I, for my part, think that my interpretation is independently plausible. I take it to be the most natural interpretation of the question, whatever metaphysical commitments you might hold, and find aversion to this interpretation a reasonable cause for suspicion. If I were a physicalist, I would still interpret the question this way, look for a wider context than human society from which the existence and value of human life could be explained, find none, and conclude both that nihilism is true and that the question arose because people suspected that there was a transcendent context capable of delivering a positive answer to the question. My conclusion would still have been that this interpretation of the question has been avoided because nihilism has mistakenly been thought of as a negative evaluation, due to theological assumptions. As it is, however, my account of consciousness leads me to believe that reality does in fact transcend our physical conception of it. So seeing this connection between the question of the meaning of life and consciousness, these accounts became mutually reinforcing. The connection does not motivate my interpretation of the question; rather it provides a better explanation of why that interpretation has been avoided, and one which is revealing about the nature of philosophy.

Although the passage I quoted above does capture the broad aims of my book, it nevertheless contains two important misrepresentations of my position; so given that I have now quoted it, I shall point out what they are. The first is where Veal says, ‘this wider context of existence, upon which the existence of the physical universe depends, is nothing other than *consciousness*’. I explicitly deny this; I say that it depends on the final context, which *cannot* be a context of consciousness. Veal knows this, because he immediately adds a footnote saying that this is a ‘*slight oversimplification*’ (p. 247; his emphasis); but that he has no time to explain why my position ultimately collapses into the one he presents. The second misrepresentation is when Veal says that I want to, ‘utilise [my] 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’. This is misleading, because although I think the recognition of transcendence goes a long way towards revealing the relatively autonomous space in which philosophical inquiry takes place, Veal is suggesting that I am trying to insulate philosophy because I am afraid natural science can do a better job on the same tasks. Rather, I argue against the philosophy of physicalism because I think science and philosophy have very different tasks. The only ‘unwanted incursions’ in question are from scientists who engage with philosophical questions while simultaneously disparaging philosophy.

Veal begins his paper by telling us that anyone who knows some science knows that a biological species is not the kind of thing which could have an overall meaning. Since humans are a biological species, then, the question of the meaning of life, as I present it, is nonsensical; an alternative conclusion, which Veal overlooks, would be that nihilism is necessarily true. There are two reasons why neither of these options can be right. The first is that just because science has a way of talking about our lives according to which the question of overall meaning does not naturally arise, it does not follow that it cannot arise; for scientific discourse occurs in the wider context of life. In talking about water scientifically, issues about taste may never arise, but we are still talking about something for which such issues do arise; as can be seen from the fact that, given how well known this example has become, people can talk about ‘the taste of this H₂O’ and be readily understood. The second reason is that if the question really were nonsensical, then it would be impossible for reality to be such that either a positive or negative answer to it was true. Nihilism may be false, just as positive accounts,

according to which human life exists within a context of meaning, may be false; but we have no reason to think that these positions are necessarily false, simply in virtue of the concepts involved, *unless* an argument can be provided to show that formulating them involves a contradiction.

If Veal had an argument of this kind, to support his claim that, ‘we have long since known that biological species are not the sorts of things that *could* have “overall meanings” or purposes’ (p. 209), then the rest of the paper would have been unnecessary. Instead, he soon backtracks to the claim that it makes ‘dubious sense at best to ask about the overall meaning of a biological species’ (p. 218). He is not sure whether it makes sense, then, but proceeding on the assumption that it does, he asks why I made sense of it the way I did. He thinks I should have followed the consensus of saying that the question is very obscure, as ‘a prelude to getting clear about the variety of ways it can be, has been, and might legitimately be construed’ (p. 214). He thinks that unlike other philosophers, I neglect the project of conceptual analysis (p. 215).

I provided an analysis of the question according to which it has two components; an existential component concerning the reason we exist, and an evaluative component about that reason. I argued that if nihilism is true, it cannot be an evaluative fact. I then proceeded to distinguish four different senses of social meaning / meaning *in* life, showing how two of these senses have been the focus of recent debates, and that a failure to distinguish them both from each other, and from the sense in which life itself might have a meaning, has led philosophers to argue at cross-purposes and draw conclusions about the meaning of life from premises about social meaning. I argued that there are also two senses of seeming meaningfulness, namely as manifest but defeasible conscious presentation and as judgement, and that inattention to this distinction undermines the most popular approach to social meaning in the debate, namely the combined subjective-objective account. All of this transpires in the introduction, which Veal quotes more than any other part of the book – but you would never guess from his paper.

In the book, I claim that the reason the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ has acquired the iconic status it has within our culture, is that it is a natural question which people have always asked and probably always will. This is a disconcerting question to ask for those without religious faith, given the negative connotations of nihilism (which I reject); and so I make the case that since recent philosophy has wanted to align itself with science, philosophers have tried to reinterpret the question in terms of social meaning. Through a combination of

these factors and others, two ideas have acquired currency both inside and outside philosophy, namely that the question is obscure and that it can be answered with an account of social meaning. As a naturalist / physicalist, Veal objects to me saying things like this. I should not have made such claims without firm empirical evidence, and it was arrogant of me to suggest that I have seen something others have overlooked. From the comfort of my armchair, as he thinks of it, I alighted on this particular interpretation of the question of the meaning of life, and ran with it because it allowed me to make a connection to consciousness, which I saw as the best defence old-fashioned metaphysics still has against the encroachments of science into its traditional territory.

As I see it, however, I was simply trying to do some original philosophical thinking. If you agree with the consensus on a topic, then that option is not open to you; but the consensus I discovered when I looked into what philosophers were currently saying about the meaning of life did not seem right to me. So I thought about it and said what did seem right to me, trying to make my case as convincingly as I could, and trying to connect what I now thought about this topic, with other issues I had been thinking about for years. One thing that struck me was that neither the question of the nature of philosophy nor the question of the meaning of life had received much attention in recent philosophy; which seemed odd. However, I knew that there had been considerable and sustained opposition to physicalist accounts of consciousness, so I was not alone there, at least. I came to the conclusion that it was physicalism that had relegated the question of the nature of philosophy to the side-lines, and thereby inspired a misinterpretation of the question of the meaning of life.

When I defended this position, it was not in order to assert what I consider plausible as superior to what everyone else considers plausible. It was in the hope that others would find what I had to say plausible, or at least some aspects of it. That is how philosophical debate works. If I had agreed with the consensus, there would have been nothing new for me to say; and if I did not, then I should have said so – as indeed I did. The hope was that people who came across these ideas, might think things like: ‘Yes, maybe nihilism isn’t so bad after all’; ‘Yes, maybe the meaning of life is an interesting philosophical question, and not just something for religious people’; ‘Yes, maybe questions about the meaning *of* life and meaning *in* life are distinct, and maybe there is a legitimate secular answer to the former’; ‘Yes, maybe the question of the nature of philosophy has received some suspiciously murky answers, and maybe this has something to do with the

influence of physicalism'; 'Yes, you can have a clean conscience about science while rejecting physicalism; perhaps we're not in the same business after all.' There were bound to be some 'no' answers too, of course, and when you encounter them, you look into the reasoning. That is how philosophical debate works; there is nothing remotely unusual about my book in this respect.

To show that people do not typically have my question in mind when they talk about the meaning of life, Veal turns to an example I gave in a paper (Tartaglia 2015), where I distinguished the meaning *in* a film, from the meaning *of* a film within a wider context than that set up by the film itself. Veal dismisses the need for ordinary language analysis or experimental philosophy to assess my example, and instead relies upon an internet search (p. 218); note how his criticisms of my methodology go by the wayside as soon as he wants to make a claim. What he finds is that when people ask about the meaning of a film, they are looking for an explanation or interpretation of the film. Perhaps so, but then they are evidently not distinguishing between the meaning *in* and *of* the film. My point was that such a distinction can be made. It makes perfect sense to ask about the meaning of a film in a wider social context, rather than about the meaning within the film, and if you did want to make that distinction, it is clear which idiom would be more appropriate; if you wanted to talk about the meaning *in* a film *in* a wider social context, this would suggest that you did not want to talk about the film as a whole, but rather something specific within it. I was trying to show that a similar distinction can be made between meaning in life and the meaning of life; and that if you make the *in* / *of* distinction, then it is quite clear which would be more appropriate to the social meaning question, and which to the traditional question. Thaddeus Metz now seems to accept this (Metz 2015). Veal takes the example more seriously than I ever would, however, because on the basis of his discovery about films, he decides that what people are really looking for when they ask about the meaning of life is a '*global narrative, worldview or explanatory framework* within which to make overall sense of their lives' (p. 218); an idea he returns to at the end of his paper, by which point his worries about biological species, and respect for diversity of opinion about the nature of the question, are apparently all behind him.

Next Veal begins to criticise me at length for – according to him – saying that 'meaning', 'value', 'significance' and 'purpose' are synonymous. He begins by quoting me:

there is only one obvious philosophical question in the area, to which senses like “value,” “significance” and “purpose” are easily related. (p. 219 / PML, p. 2)

The reader will note that I said: ‘are easily related’. The view I proceeded to explain, without any explicit or implicit claims about synonymy, is that given the existential import of the question, we are looking for a reason why we exist; and given the evaluative component, the question presupposes that this reason will make our lives valuable or significant in some way – the term ‘significant’ is more conducive to a non-moral interpretation than ‘valuable’, although they can be used synonymously in this context. I also said that a great part of our interest in the question is provided by the prospect that the reason we exist gives life a purpose. Later, Veal says that what my interpretation of the question really ‘boils down to is simply this: “Why did God create us?”’ (p. 223). But knowing why God created us would simply push the question back a stage to the question of why God exists, and of what value there was to his fulfilling his intentions by creating us; I discussed this in the book.

With the apparently wilful misreadings now stacking up fast, Veal goes on to ask why ‘rejecting the presupposition of a theological question should transform it into a “philosophical” question’ (p. 225). What Veal has in mind is my claim that if you neglect the existential component of the question, then it is transformed into either a theological question about which particular meaning God invested in life, or a question about social meaning. I did not say that the question is theological, however, but rather that if you presuppose that its evaluative component must receive a certain kind of religious answer, and focus only on specifying the exact nature of the answer, then your concern with it is purely theological. It is always going to be a philosophical question – a paradigmatically philosophical one, in fact – but those with religious or physicalist convictions tend to neglect its existential component, and hence consider only its evaluative component, because they think they already know the answer to the existential component: typically, that God created reality, for the religious; or that science explains why there is a reality – or that the question does not make sense – for the physicalists. I think both sides are wrong about this, but nevertheless, within their religious or physicalist frameworks, they are asking a philosophical question; they just think that only one part of it needs to be addressed.

The reason I reject any theological presupposition to the question is, rather

obviously, that I think nihilism is true. Veal thinks this creates huge tensions, to put it mildly, with my placing the question at the centre of my account of philosophy. This line of criticism steadily builds in intensity until Veal finally says that,

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’—has been based upon little more than a rationally unmotivated, idle, *cheap* conceptual possibility. (p. 243)

The main points that arise along the way, and which are supposed to establish this conclusion, are: firstly, that it is ridiculous to argue that the question unifies philosophy when I reject its ‘*core presupposition*’ (p. 226); secondly, that my rejection of the claim that life is absurd is incompatible with claiming that the question of the meaning of life is legitimate (p. 228); thirdly, that the notion of intrinsic value required to provide a positive answer to the question is incoherent (pp. 230-2); fourthly, that I do not provide a good reason to reject positive answers to the question (p. 234); and fifthly, that my conception of a wider context of meaning is incoherent (pp. 232-7).

The answer to the first critical point is that I think the question of the meaning of life directs us to the concept of transcendence, which we need to make metaphysical sense of the world. That I did not ask the question in a theological context has nothing to do with this, because as I tried to show, there are reasons to believe that reality is transcendent, whether or not you think the transcendent context is meaningful. I reject a certain kind of answer to the question, of the kind which has traditionally been presupposed, but not the question itself.

The second objection is good; the section on absurdity in my book does not answer it explicitly – although I did address a similar argument by Metz (PML, p. 191). In the section in question, I argue that life is not absurd; it only seems that way if we compare life to the religious meaning which we find it not to have. But if we are not to evaluate life according to this absent transcendent meaning, why claim that life is meaningless? Why use a measure of meaning that we reject in order to claim that life is meaningless? The answer is that if we do not think there is transcendent meaning, then we have no reason to evaluate life as absurd in light of its absence; but we may still think that reality is transcendent, as I argue that it

is. If reality is transcendent, and hence a transcendent reality provides the final context in which life exists, the question arises of whether that context provides our lives with meaning; a question that is firmly embedded in our history, but is a natural enough one to ask in any case. I think that the transcendence of reality does not provide us with a good reason to think it is meaningful; and this explains why I do not think we should use a transcendent measure of meaning to provide the basis for a judgement that life is absurd.

The third point is only partly a question for me, because, like Veal, I think there is only relational value. Many think there is intrinsic value, however, such as Metz (2013: 92-3). Veal goes too far when he claims that intrinsic value is impossible: 'I find that I'm unable to conceive of any such thing *in any possible world*', he says (p. 231). This must have made learning about the history of philosophy difficult; Plato's theory of forms, for instance, which Veal apparently thinks was an exclusively ethical theory with a relativistic commitment. If we trust Veal's conceivability intuitions, however, then the notion of intrinsic value must be contradictory, in which case either the question of the meaning of life necessarily has a negative answer; or else Veal might revert to his original position, with a little more substance this time, by claiming that the question is incoherent given that it embodies a contradictory notion of meaning. But there is nothing contradictory here. If Veal cannot imagine intrinsic meaning, this is only because he presupposes a physical conception of reality, and thinks that a physical characterisation of a thing would contradict a characterisation of that same thing as intrinsically valuable. I am inclined to agree about the latter, but many, such as Metz, would not. But in any case, if reality is transcendent, as I think it is, then there is no question of our conception of something which is valuable according to its own nature, conflicting with our conception of fundamental reality, because we have no positive conception of fundamental reality for it to conflict with.

The fourth point is accurate enough. I do not provide any new arguments for thinking that life is meaningless; I do not have any. As any reader of the book should quickly ascertain, that is not my focus. My focus is on reconfiguring nihilism and showing that it answers a legitimate question; my focus is on understanding 'philosophy in a meaningless life'. My own convictions about nihilism have been formed on the basis of objective thought, reflection on the nature of the framework, and suspicion of the various arguments for the existence of God. Nevertheless, my various positions on framework engagement, the fact of existence, the nature of philosophy, consciousness, and so on, do provide plenty

of reinforcement to those already inclined to believe that there is no meaning of life; while trying to assuage the natural worry that holding that reality is transcendent must conflict with this belief.

The beginning of the fifth objection is worth quoting:

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, (p. 232)

(I shall, for now, withhold comment on the substitution of ‘worthless’ for ‘meaningless’.) As Veal says, I think things only have a meaning within a wider context; in the case of our activities, this is the context provided by our social framework. But then, what is supposed to be anything less than fully coherent about claiming that if human life itself does not fit into a wider context of meaning, then it is meaningless? If the existence of life in the final context is intrinsically meaningful, then there is a meaning of life. But then life would be *part* of the final context, and hence would indeed exist within a wider context of existence. Not in the sense in which an action exists within the framework – a sense reflecting the fact that the framework is obviously not the final context – but rather in a sense more akin to that in which a tree fits into the physical universe. Essentially, the sense that human life exists in the final context, as everything that exists must.

What is meant by ‘within a wider context of existence’ must be different depending on whether or not we are talking about the final context. My reasoning here is echoed by Veal:

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, (p. 237)

All that could stop the regress is intrinsic meaning. So if God’s life were intrinsically meaningful in the final context, it would belong to a wider context only in the sense of being part of what that context amounts to; not in the sense that would defer us to something else that exists in order to account for its meaning

– because brute, meaningful existence would have been reached. Of course, I do not think there is any such existence, which is why I do not think there is a meaning of life. But it is a perfectly coherent idea of what could make life meaningful, and the only one I have either come across or can think of; it is what God, human beings, or anything else, would require in order to have a meaningful life.

None of these five points remotely support Veal’s conclusion, with which I began this part of the discussion, about my supposed position on the entire history of philosophy, religion and science. And that just about brings us to the culmination of Veal’s narrative, where he reveals the plot of my book. But before I turn to what he says afterwards, I shall comment on his passing accusation that I misinterpreted Milton Munitz (p. 239); because Veal thinks this leaves me all alone, thereby highlighting how thoroughly idiosyncratic my position is. When I discovered Munitz’s work, I focused on the better-known *Boundless Existence*, but I did make one reference to his later *Does Life Have A Meaning?*, saying that in this book, ‘Munitz sometimes expresses his message about social meaning in an unnecessarily ambiguous manner’ (PML, p. 187). Further down the page from the quotation Veal provides, thinking he has found Munitz rejecting the traditional question, Munitz turns to ‘Boundless Existence’, or as I would say, transcendent reality, and says that ‘since Boundless Existence is Nothing, Emptiness, then *in this respect* life has no meaning either’ (Munitz 1993, p. 109). As I was saying, Munitz could have made his ‘yes and no’ answer a lot clearer (ibid., p. 113).

After the culmination of Veal’s paper, there are three extraordinary pages (pp. 253-5), in which he says that my book could foreseeably provoke both suicide and terrorism, and hence is deeply irresponsible. The reasoning, as regards the former, is that one of the most frequently cited reasons for suicide is the feeling that your life is ‘meaningless and worthless’ (p. 253). The reasoning, as regards the latter, is that terrorists who accept a particular, fundamentalist reading of their sacred texts, of the kind which Veal strongly suggests that he endorses as correct (pp. 254-5), think that mortal life is meaningless / worthless, but that transcendent reality is paradise. Since Veal thinks, or at least says, that I take essentially the same view – which requires him to disregard pretty much everything about the book, including the first sentence of the preface, even – then since Veal also thinks this fundamentalist reading encourages the killing of unbelievers, he accuses my position of helping to justify terrorist suicide attacks. Given the fundamentalist reading, which Veal strongly suggests that he endorses, he is prepared to ask: ‘who

can blame them?’ (p. 255).

It is now high time to comment on the meaningless / worthless issue. The word ‘worthless’ appears thirty-six times in Veal’s paper. It appears nine times in my book: twice in a discussion on page 6, once in a quotation from Robert Nozick on page 18, and six times in a discussion on page 171. In both of the discussions, the point I argue for – and it is abundantly clear that the only reason I use the word ‘worthless’ is to make this point – is that the metaphysical sense in which I am saying that life is meaningless, is *not* the social sense in which we might condemn life as worthless. This is what I say the first time:

If life has a meaning, then, this could be bad. But nihilism cannot be. 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. (PML, p. 6)

And this is what I say the second time:

The straightforward mistake at the root of all elaborate attempts to escape from nihilism is an equation of ‘meaningless’ with ‘socially worthless’. It is perfectly reasonable that people should want to avoid condemning life as worthless in this sense, of course; worthless things are bad, and unless we can reform them, we generally want to either ignore or get rid of them. Arguably mosquitoes are worthless. If human life were worthless, then extreme, unrestricted misanthropy and so-called antinatalism – the view that being born is bad and that the extinction of the human race would be good – would not be absurd. And if we did take this kind of view seriously, the solution to our predicament would be obvious, just as Epicurus saw: it would be to solve Camus’s ‘one truly serious philosophical problem’ with suicide. Thankfully (if rather conveniently) the advocates of these views usually manage to persuade themselves that this is not the solution. However, the judgement that life is socially worthless is an evaluation whereas the judgement that life is meaningless is not. (p. 171)

The reader can now see all of my eight uses of the word ‘worthless’. There is no trace of an argument in Veal’s paper to the effect that the above reasoning fails,

and hence that, in discussing my position, ‘worthless’ is a valid substitution for ‘meaningless’. So in light of this, it does not strike me as reasonable academic practice to continually make this substitution, or else place ‘meaningless’ and ‘worthless’ alongside each other as if I considered them synonymous.

Now in the first quotation above, I said, ‘To say that life is meaningless is to say that it is valueless or worthless’; and immediately qualified this by saying that I do not mean in ‘the socially contextual sense that would amount to a condemnation’. In the metaphysical sense, life is indeed worthless; and loveless; and hateless, etc., because the final context of reality is not a context of meaning. No evaluative concepts can apply to our existence if there is no meaning of life; and when we do sometimes, outside of metaphysics, apply them to life as a whole, I think we almost inevitably say something either vacuous or false (PML, p. 53, 56). The reason I alighted upon worthlessness in particular to make my point, is because I think the false view that nihilism is negatively evaluative results from confusing it with a social condemnation. As I say in the second passage, ‘The straightforward mistake at the root of all elaborate attempts to escape from nihilism is an equation of “meaningless” with “socially worthless”’. One of the main aims of my book was to diagnose the error of making this equation. Veal may still make it, but if there is anyone who it should not be attributed to, then that person is surely me. And yet this is what Veal does: again and again and again.

There is a mention of suicide in the second passage. Here, as the passage makes quite clear, I had in mind misanthropic views, such as those of Schopenhauer, Cioran, and David Benatar, according to which human life is provided with a negative evaluation, and it is claimed that it would be better if we did not exist. My point was that if life could correctly be evaluated as worthless, which is an idea I consider completely absurd, then suicide would indeed seem like a sensible solution. I mentioned this kind of position because it shows the most extreme conclusion you could reach from mistakenly thinking of nihilism as a negative evaluation; a mistake I set out to diagnose, thereby undermining such positions, to the extent that they use nihilism as a motivation. Ray Brassier commented on Veal’s paper for him. Brassier wrote a book defending nihilism and opened his book with a quotation from Thomas Ligotti, who uses nihilism to utterly condemn human life. The other commentator was Metz. Metz thinks of nihilism as a negative evaluation; if a person lives a meaningless life, then this is certainly very bad, on his view, even if it does not follow that their life is socially worthless. So if there were anything to Veal’s extreme criticisms of my position,

I think Brassier and Metz would have a lot more to worry about than me.

So let me start with the ‘lending encouragement to suicide’ idea. I wrote a book in which I argued that nihilism is not an evaluation, and in which I attacked the view that the question of the meaning of life concerns social meaning of a meritorious kind that can be measured and compared, such that one person might be praised for living a meaningful life, and another condemned for living a comparatively meaningless one. If somebody was worried by the thought that their life was meaningless, and could not be persuaded out of it, then I should have thought that this is exactly the kind of thing they would want to hear. For I am saying that there is no intellectual substance to the idea that their particular life has failed to reach the level of meaningfulness of other people’s, and hence is worthy of condemnation; and that in the only substantive sense in which life is meaningless, the same is true of *everybody*. Moreover, it is not bad that life is meaningless in this more weighty sense: to think that it is, is to make an intellectual error.

Now for the ‘lending encouragement to terrorism’ idea. I wrote a book arguing that transcendent reality is meaningless and cannot be a context of consciousness; that all value and meaning resides within the mortal lives we find within the context of consciousness. If the terrorist is persuaded by that, then they have a decisive reason to call off their suicide attack, because they will no longer believe that it will take them to paradise; they will no longer believe there is a paradise, and will instead believe that they will never find any value except in mortal life, which is the only kind there is.

Once more, let me try to find the underlying concern; for there must surely be one, even in these extreme cases. As Veal is aware, I think philosophy has become far too insular, and can counteract this by reconnecting with issues that matter to people, such as the meaning of life. His worry is that this is dangerous territory. People end their lives because they feel them to be meaningless, and the notion of transcendence persuades others to condemn this life as meaningless and to attack those who place value in it. On the most charitable interpretation I can muster, Veal realises that I am not promoting such notions, but worries that my views would be open to misinterpretation within the public domain; and that any attempt to revive interest in issues such as nihilism and transcendence is consequently irresponsible. In his view, such issues are best left alone; not only are they patent nonsense, as any respectable naturalist realises, but they are also dangerous in the wrong hands.

It seems to me, however, that these issues are already firmly in the public domain, and that it is the duty of academic philosophy to try to give rational direction to their discussion. If there are good reasons to think that nihilism is not an evaluative condemnation, as I think there are, then it must be a good thing to argue this, given the harm that the negative evaluation idea can have. Simply avoiding the topic is not going to help, not only because the view that nihilism is a negative evaluation is firmly embedded in many minds, as Veal's examples show, but also because some philosophers continue to reinforce this view. Providing support to the religious view that reality is transcendent has its dangers, of course, but so does the naturalist dismissal of such views. For if the meaning of life is interpreted as a question of social meaning, not only does nihilism remain a negative evaluation, but the issue arises of how to draw a principled distinction between making your life socially meaningful in a moral, or at least non-immoral way, and making it socially meaningful in any way whatsoever; desire to achieve fame at any cost strikes me as evidently on the rise in our world, and a very worrying social trend. If defenders of a social conception of the meaning of life, as they think of it, continue to insist that the notion they have in mind precludes immoral action, and if defenders of the traditional conception continue to insist either that there is no transcendent context, or that there is one but that it cannot, or does not, usurp the value we find in life, then we are all on the right side. If we can find arguments to support these stances, we will potentially be doing some good. Saying nothing is not the answer from a social, pragmatic stance, because there are others on the wrong side; arguing against such views will not *help* their efforts. And from a more purely philosophical point of view, if the issues are legitimate, then philosophers *should* discuss them, so long as they do so responsibly.

Veal finishes the paper with a naturalistic sketch of a theory of the meaning of life, as he thinks of it. He thinks that by, '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, [we] can provide considerable meaning to our lives, both individually and collectively' (p. 255). He says that we are special, both for our physical unusualness, and the fact that this has allowed us to acquire extensive knowledge about the universe; and that this is 'quite capable of providing "overall meaning" to our lives' (p. 256). He goes on to say that our lives are made more meaningful when we reject the idea of an afterlife, and realise that our mortal lives are the only ones we will ever have (p.

256).

This is the only part of the paper, except for the incongruous introduction, where my work is not being targeted; so my judgement that Veal seems to work best in this positive vein should perhaps be taken with a pinch of salt. However, if he does want to pursue this project, I think he would be well-advised to drop the phrase ‘the meaning of life’; given his deep suspicions about it, and the fact that the picture he has in mind would not address that issue. For it would not answer the existential component; this cannot be done within an exclusively naturalistic framework. Although some people might find that reflecting on their place with the natural world allows them to attribute a certain kind of value to human life as a whole, such value does not explain why human life exists. We are not here because we are physically unusual, if indeed we are. We are not here because we value the physical processes that produced us, if indeed we do; they certainly do not value us. Others who do not make the physicalist’s confusion of naturalistic knowledge with metaphysics might say, rather more naturally, that our capacity for love, for instance, attributes a certain kind of value to human life as a whole; but, *ceteris paribus*, this would be equally tangential to the question.

Veal has simply looked for a question he can ask within an exclusively naturalistic framework; one which shadows in form the question of the meaning of life. But since it will not address the philosophical concerns behind that question, this simply muddies the waters. Perhaps this is what he wants to do; but if his concerns really are constructive, and if he is consistent, then I do not think it makes sense for him to allow a discredited theological agenda, as he sees it, to dictate his project. Nevertheless, I am perfectly open to the idea that naturalists may be able to say something plausible about our ‘specialness’, if that is something people desire. And maybe it could be argued that our lives acquire more social meaning when we no longer believe in a transcendent context of meaning; although I am sure religious believers would disagree, so this is one for them and the naturalists to discuss. Personally, I am very suspicious of such judgements, as I made plain in my book.

Finally, a word on Veal’s title: “‘Life is Meaningless.’ Compared to What?’ I cannot see that it has much to do with the paper, but nevertheless, here is the answer I gave (at this point in the book, I was discussing the more specific hypothesis that life has a purpose):

Life has no overall purpose compared to what? Compared to games, to how

things seem in the framework, and to how things might be if there is a wider context of meaning. We cannot give our lives this kind of purpose, but we do not need to anyway, because we have more localized and transitory purposes to occupy ourselves with. (PML, p. 56)

This answer refers back to my reflections upon our typical absorption in the framework; reflections which bring nihilism into view. Veal pays no attention to any of this and so nihilism never comes into view for him. This is fine, since no one needs to engage in this kind of reflection if it does not interest them; that said, Veal was writing a critique of my book and he chose a title which suggested he would. Nevertheless, in light of his positive views, you would expect him to be sympathetic to at least the final sentence.

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