

Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.2

Interdisciplinary Approaches

Edited by

Masahiro Morioka

Journal of Philosophy of Life



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Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.2

Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers and the essay published in the Special Issue “Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.2: Interdisciplinary Approaches,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.10, No.1, 2020, pp.1-133.

We held the Second International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life at Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan, on October 7-9, 2019. This conference was co-hosted by The Waseda Institute of Life and Death Studies and The Center for Applied Ethics and Philosophy, Hokkaido University. We accepted about 50 presentations from around the world, and invited Professor Yujin Nagasawa and Professor Rivka Weinberg as keynote speakers.

After the conference, we called for papers for publication from the speakers and we accepted six papers and an essay for the special issue of *Journal of Philosophy of Life*. We would like to give special thanks to anonymous referees who kindly reviewed submitted manuscripts. The accepted papers deal with a variety of topics such as phenomenology, Stoicism, Susan Wolf, environmental issues, and Japanese philosophy, and are all discussed from the perspective of the philosophy of meaning in life.

In 2020, we hold the Third International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life online at University of Birmingham, UK. We are planning to publish a collection of the presented papers in *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.11, to be published in 2021.

As the editor-in-chief, I hope that readers will enjoy the stimulating papers in this volume.

Masahiro Morioka

Professor, Waseda University

Editor-in-chief, *Journal of Philosophy of Life*

July, 15, 2020.

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Affinity, Worth, and Fecundity

On Susan Wolf's Advice for Living a Meaningful Life

John Partridge*

Abstract

I examine Wolf's hybrid theory of meaning in life and her recommendation of an important additional consideration for persons wishing to live meaningfully. Her advice is that we consider whether and to what extent our caring for something would create additional unique and transformative value. I call this fecundity. Wolf is correct to think that the prospect of fecundity matters to agents who wish to live meaningfully, though it is not a requirement on meaning like affinity and worth. Still the advice raises questions about her analysis. I pose the objectivists' query about the necessity of the subjective "affinity" condition, but also argue that key elements of the affinity condition are better captured by an emotional state theory of happiness.

1. An Important Third Consideration for Those Wishing to Live Meaningfully

Susan Wolf's hybrid theory holds that meaning in life arises "when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness." Thus, we should consider both affinity and worth in determining the reasonableness of our projects, cares, and activities. She seems to hold that activities or projects that meet the affinity and worth requirements may have another feature as well. One way she puts it is as follows:

In other words, meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, when one finds oneself able to love what is worth loving, *and able, further*, to do something with or about it—to contribute to or promote or preserve or give honor and appreciation to what one loves. (Wolf 2002, 237, emphasis added).

Just being at the intersection of affinity and worth is not enough. As the passage indicates, a certain kind of activity and some measure of success must happen as well. This is clear and consistent throughout Wolf's work as I'll show in part 3.

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But the sense that there could be something else *besides* affinity and worth comes earlier. She says that there are “at least three sorts of consideration” we should undertake when determining what would be most suitable to care about or love. The third is “whether (and how much) the relation between the person and the object has the potential to create or bring forth experiences, acts, or objects of further value” (235). Here is the fullest elaboration of her point:

Perhaps even more important than the considerations mentioned so far is a further point—namely, that affinity for an object, activity or person encourages or makes possible kinds of worth or value that would not exist without it, value that lies not in the object considered in itself, but in the lover of that object or the relationship between them. Some people bring out the best in each other; they allow or encourage each other to fulfill their potentials. Similarly, a person’s affinity for a genre or for a more particular type of entity can inspire and stimulate him in ways no other thing can. One thinks of Glenn Gould’s relation to Bach, of Merchant and Ivory’s relation to post-Victorian fiction. (Wolf 2002, 235)

Wolf states that the third consideration is possibly “more important” than the other considerations. Why?

This moment in Wolf’s argument invites us to look very carefully at the intersection of affinity and worth to better understand her advice to persons looking to live meaningfully. My paper aims to examine this intersection and her advice of a third consideration. I conclude that Wolf is right to offer this advice, but for reasons that differ somewhat from those implied by her analysis. I believe that the third consideration, which I’ll call “fecundity,” becomes visible in some instances of the affinity-worth intersection, though fecundity is not a distinct requirement on meaning. So far, Wolf might agree. But she will disagree with my reevaluation of affinity, the key features of which are better accounted for by the right conception of happiness. And she’ll disagree with one potential implication of my view, namely that worth is not only necessary for meaning, but may be sufficient for it. My aim here, however, is to argue that fecundity describes the condition of an agent who is more likely to successfully and durably produce transformative objective worth. On the view I favor, happiness characterizes the emotional state of such a person. Thus, Wolf is right to put

forward this evocative characterization of fecundity when advising those who wish to live meaningfully; and she is right to see meaning's motivation to be distinct from the motivations of hedonic conceptions of happiness as a final good. But on my view, it is because happiness, rightly understood, is playing an important role in making meaning more likely.

2. Fecundity in Wolf and Frankfurt

Let me now come back to Wolf's evocative picture of a life in which affinity and worth come together in the special way that creates unique value. Why, we can ask afresh, is this such an important element in life?

There might be many different answers. First, the "experiences, acts, or objects of further value" denote a value that obtains uniquely. Second, it is a value that is grounded not in the object, but in the subject or in the relationship between subject and object (cf. Nozick's notion of relational meaning). There are also gestures toward the idea that we are engaged in the fulfillment of our nature, or in developing and exercising our capabilities, or in plumbing deep or core features of our identity.

Whatever precisely she means in that passage, Wolf certainly affirms that our caring can be generative of other values and productive of special outcomes that arise in no other way. I believe that this generative dimension of meaning obtains our caring results in deep, intense, or comprehensive engagement of a productive sort. Specifically, the caring should engage us deeply in ways that leave distinctive marks on us and on the world. It leaves a mark on us by fulfilling our potential, or realizing our nature, or exercising our capabilities. And it leaves a mark on the world by inspiring the creation of independent value that would not otherwise exist.

Call this "fecundity." At its heart is a generative and transformative dimension of living. It recalls Plato's *Symposium* when Diotima instructs Socrates that we all seek to "give birth in beauty." Socrates, now convinced of Diotima's account of what it is like to be in contact with Beauty itself and by itself, seeks every day to honor Eros (212b). He does this by giving birth to true virtue and rearing it (212a). That is to say, he creates or brings forth experiences, acts, or objects of further value. In this way, Socrates is engaged in an activity

that transforms himself and the world.¹ I'll come back to Diotima very briefly at the end, but first I want to say a few more words about fecundity as it appears in more contemporary discussions.

A brief look at Frankfurt may help us understand the generative dimension of fecundity and its contribution to enhancing the goodness of one's life. To begin, Frankfurt speaks of the way that loving and care produce value. "[E]very possibility of loving is a possibility of bringing about a state of affairs that possesses some value" (Frankfurt 2002, 246). What is more, he writes that when people love things for which they have an affinity, they are provided with "rich opportunities for fulfilling their most satisfying capacities, and that enable them to flourish" (2002, 245).² This captures the idea that affinity can leave a mark on us. In addition, he shows how caring shapes our identity and directs our actions (1988/1982, p. 83), which are conditions that make it possible for us to impact the world. A summary of his position on these matters is no better stated than in *The Reasons of Love*: "It is by caring about things that we infuse the world with importance. This provides us with stable ambitions and concerns; it marks our interests and our goals" (2004, 23).

Frankfurt can accept my characterization of fecundity to the extent that he understands how care and loving both create value and are personally transformative or structuring. On these points, he and Wolf agree. But—famously or infamously—his view is that love and care not only create value and make one's life meaningful, but they may do so regardless of the objective worth of the object of care.³ This is a big difference since for Wolf, meaningful activity must involve the agent in something of independent worth, whereas Frankfurt's meaningful activity is significant because it connects the agent intrapersonally. Specifically, the loving agent connects him- or herself via distinctive volitional states that give rise to oneself and one's identity. Wolf's

¹ The *Phaedrus* tells a similar story, but (1) adds an essential role for interpersonal eros and (2) offers a fuller account of how the loving subject is transformed by his erotic engagement. The philosophical lovers in the *Phaedrus* find in their love for one another a path that connects them to the truth (252d). This is a pattern that permits them to imitate the god and the right way to live (253a) and which, if they remain chaste, yields virtue (256b). Like Socrates, then, the lovers in the *Phaedrus* also bring forth virtue, and in so doing, transform themselves and the world.

² What are "satisfying capacities"? Does he mean to say that the value of exercising our capacities is hedonic?

³ "An enthusiastically meaningful life need not be connected to anything that is objectively valuable, nor need it include any thought that the things to which it is devoted are good. Meaning in life is created by loving. Devoting oneself to what one loves suffices to make one's life meaningful, regardless of the inherent or objective character of the objects that are loved" (Frankfurt 2002, 250)

examples in the passage above, by contrast, also link the activity of the caring self to outcomes or states of affairs like beauty in music or film. In Wolf, the further value created by the fecund agent is not neutral or agnostic with respect to its mind-independent outcomes or objects. Let's turn to her picture now.

3. A Closer Look at Wolf's Intersection of Affinity and Worth

In her 2010 book, Wolf writes in familiar ways when she holds that meaning arises “when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, *and one is able to do something about it or with it*” (26, emphasis added here and below). But she also speaks in somewhat different ways to illuminate things, saying that meaning arises from “loving objects worthy of love *and engaging with them in a positive way*” (2010, 8; cf. 2010, 8-10). Later, these same ideas return: “meaning arises when we *actively engage* in loving objects worthy of love *in a positive way*” (2010, 27). This way of putting the point leaves aside the evocative specification of what our caring might do to us and to the world; also, there is no more mention of Gould or Merchant and Ivory. In fact, when she captures the dynamic and generative dimension of meaning in life, she does so in a different way:

By living in a way that is partly occupied by and directed toward the preservation or promotion or creation of value that has its source outside of oneself, one does something that can be understood, admired or appreciated from others' points of view, including the point of view of an impartial indifferent observer. (2010, 28-29)

With this passage, she is moving away from, or merely emphasizing less, the picture she offered in her 2002 piece. Indeed, the focus here is to specify what sort of objective worth is present in a meaningful life; there is less attention on the condition of the agent living a meaningful life (as she herself recognizes; see n. 5 below).

In her 2007/2016 essay, a similar stress on the objective worth side of her formula emerges. She offers a series of cases, starting up from the most meaningless life she can think of, in order to “highlight by their absences other elements of meaningfulness” (116). Blob spends day after day, and night after night, watching sit-coms on TV and drinking beer. Blob's life is lived in a “hazy

passivity” that while not unpleasant, is “unconnected to anyone or anything, going nowhere, achieving nothing” (2007/2016, 116). The Idle Rich Person, contra Blob’s passivity, has a life full of activity. But the activity is silly, decadent or useless. Finally, the Corporate Exec unlike the others, has activity that is serious (they work “twelve-hour, seven-day weeks, suffering great stress”) but does it only in order to amass personal wealth. Wolf also mentions Wiggins’ Pig Farmer as a person who resembles the Corporate Exec. Like the Exec, there is activity, and activity that has an aim. But it is an endless toil of buying land, to farm corn, to feed pigs, to buy more land, to farm more corn, to feed more pigs, etc.

The dominant activities in the first group of lives share a common feature: they seem “pointless, useless, or empty.” She labels them all Useless. And unlike the cases below, they are activities which may succeed at what they are doing, but are not meaningful because their values are “shallow or misguided” (2007/2016, 117). Also, for Wolf these three cases are meant to be rather clearly meaningless, while the next three (and especially the last one) are cases about which, she acknowledges, it may be more controversial to say they lack meaning. First on the list is the Bankrupt Manufacturer who devoted “his life to creating and building up a company to hand over to his children,” only for the product to become obsolete right as he retires. Then comes the Scooped Scientist whose imminent discovery is published weeks earlier by another scientist. Finally, there is the person in a Fraudulent Relationship whose devotion made another person central to their life, but the relationship was a fraud (2007/2016, 117). These three cases she labels Bankrupt. They are aiming at the right kinds of ends, but are unsuccessful in bringing them off.

These paradigms of meaningless lives provide the opportunity for her to show what a meaningful life must contain. Blob’s meaningless life helps to establish that meaning in life requires activity, and she means this to involve more than just motion or physical activity.⁴ After all, the cases of the idle rich person and the corporate executive help to secure a requirement that the activity

⁴ “If there is nothing we love or are able to love, a meaningful life is not open to us” (Wolf 2002, 237). In part five, I use the case of the Exiled Daughter to suggest, as various objective theorists have also done, that this is not true because we can have a meaningful life despite being in a disfavorable emotional state with respect to our dominant project. If Wolf’s claim is that meaning in life is unavailable to the person who could not love their project, perhaps because it does not merit love, then I would agree. But then this is really a problem for the project’s worth, not the agent’s attitude toward it; and as the rest of this paragraph and the next footnote shows, for Wolf the person must have the right attitude toward it.

involves *active engagement*, which they all notably lack. This term, active engagement, is doing rather heavy lifting. The projects we're actively engaged in are ones that we identify with, embrace, and regard with pride (118-119).⁵ To be sure, one will not find meaning in life, she thinks, in a state of passive receptivity, nor in unserious flitting around in amusements. But crucially too, she claims, one will not find meaning where there is alienation or when "going through the motions." Thus, Wolf's alienated housewife (118-119, cf. 115-116 and 121) lacks the subjective sense that her experience of endless chores is rewarding or fulfilling, and instead feels "emptiness and dissatisfaction" (116). So too for the conscripted soldier (2010, 113), where subjective affinity of the necessary sort is called "fulfillment" (see also Wolf 1997 and 2010). Let's take a closer look at this so we can understand the significance of its absence.

Fulfillment, Wolf says, is a type of hedonistically-valued subjective state, but one that is contrasted with the "fun" of an amusement park ride and other mere pleasures. But there is much more to it than this. It is a rewarding subjective experience that one feels, but also that has a cognitive component directed at the object or activity that provides the feeling. Wolf holds that to meet the affinity requirement, the object or source of the feeling must be seen as good or worthwhile in some independent way (2010, 24). Indeed, she thinks that the object of affinity is not merely desired but recognized as desirable and "*felt* to answer a certain kind of human need" (26). The felt need is for a kind of objective or independent value that one's activity links up to. In fact, when we feel that were occupied with something of independent worth, it can be thrilling (29). Her view of affinity or fulfillment, then, really takes seriously the idea of its intersection with worth. She is careful not to make the feeling into something too intellectual, but it does involve an appreciation or felt sense of the independent value of the activity by which we are engaged. In the ideal case, the activities that engage us are ones that the alienated housewife "would proudly and happily embrace" as "constituting at least part of what her life is about" (2007/2016, 119).

For Wolf, the affinity condition on meaning requires the right sort of subjective attraction, one denoted by "active engagement" or "fulfillment." Not

⁵ Wolf cites her 2007/2016 and her 1997 as sources for the claim that "meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth" (2010, 26) but says in a footnote that "this formulation fails to emphasize the element of love (or passion or identification) as much as the other" (26, n. 12).

every subjective proattitude will rise to the level needed for meaning to emerge. Active engagement is rather thickly conceived to involve a range of attitudes and affects, as well as volitional and cognitive commitments.⁶ Only on this thick construal will we see subjective attraction as “a great and distinctive good in life” (2010, 15). This shows how complicated the intersection of affinity and worth becomes. It is no mere intersection, nor a haphazard coming together. The subjective state must be partly constituted by a judgment of the worth of the source of the subjective state; the affinity or sense of fulfillment must be fitting or apt.

We can see this in her discussion of the first three cases under the Useless category when she says that the activity must be positive. Her sense of this term is not initially obvious. Wolf says she wants to be pluralistic about what sorts of activities meet this characterization of being “positive,” recognizing that people like different things (e.g., some like sports, others like intellectual pursuits). The only firm line she draws is saying that the activity must be value-bearing apart from the subject’s regarding it so (2007/2016, 119-120). This is objective worth, clearly. Additionally, Wolf draws on the three Bankrupt cases to say that we need some success in our activity if it is to contribute meaning to our life. Abject failure, or even significant thwarting, cuts against the intuition that an activity is meaningful.⁷ These points help us to see that the objective worth condition can only confer meaning in life when there genuinely is independent worth and there is some degree of success in bringing out that value or linking up to it.

These arguments confirm that Wolf’s slogan characterizes two distinct sources of value which can intersect, and that the additional clause details a requirement of what must happen at that intersection. Affinity and worth are necessary, she thinks, but something like these extra elaborations, captured by the phrase “active engagement in a positive way,” merely show what sort and degree of affinity and what sort and amount of worth are needed for meaning to

⁶ See her 2010, 112-114 where, when responding to critics, she says that “fulfillment” names a complex and variable subjective state (like love), but she adds that this cannot be cashed out in terms of happiness. I argue in part 6 that to an important degree it can and should be cashed out in terms of happiness.

⁷ There are many cases, however, where a measure of meaning can emerge (See Schmidtz’s failed sandbagging efforts [2001/2016, 103]; Wolf’s scooped scientist or her failed poet also come to mind) but an account would be required (as Wolf rightly agrees cf. 2007/2016, 117; I offer such a case and such an account in my discussion of the exiled corporate exec in part five). In her 2010 reply to critics, she affirms again that success matters, to some degree. See pp. 104-107 and her discussion of what we’d say to the failed scientist and how we can’t say whether a minor poet’s life is less meaningful than a major poet’s life (108).

appear.

Soon I'll raise a doubt about this picture by asking what would happen if the activities and experiences merit pride and identification, but the person having or performing them holds back, or does not find the characteristic subjective rewards in them. Wolf's position entails that such a person is not living meaningfully, but objective theorists like Metz, Smuts, and Bramble disagree. And supporters of a rival hybrid view, like Evers and van Smeden, think that the affinity requirement is too strong and wish to recast it as a valuing requirement. Like these critics, I think that the affinity requirement, as Wolf characterizes it, opens her position to counterexamples. However, the impact of these counterexamples can be mitigated by Svensson's stress that meaning in life "depends at least in part on what that person likes, enjoys, cares about, or desires" (Svensson 2017, 50), and my case in part five features a person whose project is desired and cared about, but who still experiences significant disaffection. In this way, I think that Wolf's point about having subjective attraction to our projects and activities matters, and so I think she is right to advise us to consider what our affinity makes possible and how it does so.

4. What the Search for a Third Condition Called Fecundity Shows

Initially in Wolf, the third consideration for agents seeking to live meaningfully, which I call fecundity, looks like a separate claim about agents straddling the affinity-worth intersection who then bring forth special value. But that impression may be formed more by the way she is arguing there. Her examples—of Gould, and Merchant and Ivory—imply that she's looking at exceptionally meaningful lives, or at least lives that are unambiguously meaningful. This approach helps her to draw out the full importance of having meaning as a concept distinct from happiness and morality.⁸ We can judge that Gauguin's life, for example (cf. Wolf 2007/2016, 120), is quite meaningful *even as he* shirks moral duty by abandoning his wife and children, and, I would add, *even as he* endures considerable unhappiness, given all of his suffering, poverty, illness, and frustration. Once Wolf establishes meaning as a concept distinct from the concepts of happiness and morality, she can then begin to work through her particular conception of meaning as a hybrid of affinity and worth. This is

⁸ Metz uses "admiration" or "love" to capture the third value (Metz 2016).

where she makes refinements that detail what thresholds must be reached in both affinity and worth, or what degree of intertwining they have. As we have seen, her argument proceeds not with a vision of a life of resplendent meaning, but via several paradigms of meaninglessness that permit her to construct a particular conception of meaning that would successfully match our intuitions about meaning in life. Central to these intuitions, she believes, is that the concept of meaning in life speaks to our desire and need for objectivity.

The case she makes for the necessity of objectivity is quite effective.⁹ To see what role is played by the affinity condition, I'll examine a case of a meaningful life in which robust subjective attraction is lacking. But in the final section, I want to follow out Wolf's advice on fecundity. I'll show that fecundity is certainly a property found in many good lives, and so it is prudent for agents to consider the likelihood that their projects will have the generative and transformative impacts that fecundity denotes.

5. Meaning Without Affinity: The Case of the Exiled Daughter

Wolf has argued that even the intense activity of the Corporate Exec fails to meet the standard of "active engagement in a positive way" because their "misguided values" seem to misconstrue the worth of amassing a private fortune either as such, or in relation to the frenetic activity that it requires. The problem may also be that the goal of amassing personal fortune is not one that the person embraces in the right way. They may be doing it automatically, say, rather like the pig farmer who just continues the cycle endlessly. Or it may be something that they cannot or do not take pride in or identify with, or that won't bear up if a justificatory demand is made. Whether through lack of objective worth, or insufficiency of subjective attraction, we can imagine that the Corporate Exec is one long dark night of the soul away from a collapse.

Let's consider a variation of the case. Imagine that a family now lives in exile, having fled a corrupt state that destroyed the family business, seizing all of its assets and all of the family's wealth. This so aggrieves that father that he lives the rest of his life in bitterness. The daughter grows up and decides to amass a personal fortune equal to the amount that was seized, and strains every

⁹ Moreover, as Metz has argued, "many of what initially appear to be motives to adopt subjectivism lead us, upon reflection, to think that there are things that are good not solely because they are the object of a propositional attitude" (Metz 2013, 170).

nerve to achieve it before the father dies. It becomes her overriding project; it defines her. Surely the life of *this* Corporate Exec, the Exiled Daughter so described, is not meaningless anymore.

Wolf would be right to object. On this scenario, it is not a “mere” personal fortune, but a project that has both real and symbolic meaning. The project aims at rebuilding the family fortune and, by doing so, mending the sorrow that ails the father, restoring the family’s honor, and providing the legacy that was lost. I believe, and think that Wolf would too, that this life is no longer a paradigm of meaninglessness, but perhaps even an exemplary case of meaning in life. But let me make it harder for her to accept this with one last wrinkle.

It’s the same scenario but in this version, the daughter achieves everything in a state of disaffection.¹⁰ Perhaps she is burdened by demands of filial piety that she can neither fully endorse and make her own, nor entirely resist in order to live differently. Then we are back with a case that feels more like it is meaningless for Wolf. She resembles the alienated housewife insofar as both regard the endless swirl of unfulfilling obligations as something they cannot embrace and identify with. Let us add further that in this situation, the father’s mood brightens considerably; he finds himself delightedly telling stories of how he started his business back in his home country, and he now beams with pride when he speaks of his daughter. Other family members find inspiration in the daughter’s project, and they aren’t the only ones. The news media transmit the story in ways that draw positive attention to her and her family, while also driving increased scrutiny of her former home country and its corrupt past. Eventually, legal action is taken successfully against the corrupt officials, some of whom go to jail. All through this process, the family legacy is enhanced. People see the daughter as possessing the same traits that the father used when making his business so successful, and this inspires other emigrants in similar circumstances to take action. A political movement is born; in time the country’s corruption is removed, root and branch.

One would be hard pressed to find a more profound impact of a life. Even

¹⁰ Landau 2017 (171) and Metz 2013 (183-4, cf. 135) each discuss a case like this one, with a pained or bored Mother Teresa, respectively. Bramble’s example of Alice the Master Economist (2015, 448), whose beneficial work is sheer drudgery for her, is closer to mine since our unhappy persons are each uniquely fitted to do the beneficial work that no one else can do. But my case is different still because other important features of fecundity are present in the Exiled Daughter. She finds that her capabilities are both expressed in and further refined by the work that she does, but for which she has lost her passion.

without sharing the money or doing something with it (it remains “a personal fortune”), the daughter’s work has objective worth because it successfully carries out a positive project. Moreover, there is a significantly fecund outcome: her activity brings forth real value but it is value that only she could create. Such value is expressive of her own values and the values of family members whom she loves. The activity also tests her talents and refines her capabilities through her considerable struggle, with the result that she is altered for the better, at least in these respects. Still, like Wolf’s alienated housewife and the conscripted soldier, she finds no joy in the activity. What is more, she does not identify with or take pride in it, even as those closest to her, whom she loves, do so and urge her to do likewise. Or, if she identifies with or takes pride in it, she does so weakly. Either way, she lacks the customary felt-sense of fulfillment, or the thrill of connecting up with independent worth. It would appear that this is a case that lacks the right degree of, or an importance aspect of affinity, active engagement or fulfillment that Wolf believes is partly constitutive of meaning in life.

Wolf or her supporter might say that this case is not likely, and I agree.¹¹ But supposing it psychologically possible, as I think it is, then the life in question is meaningful without being subjectively rewarding. So, at any rate, might Metz, Smuts, and Bramble argue. Even if they are right, however, I believe Wolf’s advice to persons who want to live meaningfully remains sound. We should look for experiences and activities that are apt to hold us in their thrall for a long while, and which test our capabilities, draw on our skills, and alter us for the better when engaging them. Such undertakings promote meaningfulness. They do so in part because they provide lasting inspiration, which sustains us through reversals, begets opportunities for additional creative or transformative activity and experiences, and makes more independent value more likely to appear.

6. How Fecundity Describes One Kind of Very Good Life

Wolf’s discussion of the alienated housewife, like my case of the Exiled Daughter, helps us to see how much of a loss alienation brings us. It is a loss to the goodness of our life. Even if our life remains good because it is meaningful, it would be better still were the subjective rewards present. Still, as many argue,

¹¹ In her 1997, she calls the possibility “dubious” (208; cf. 222 on how happiness tracks meaningfulness much more frequently than it does meaninglessness).

what matters for meaning is not our affinity for our projects but what we're able to do with our projects. Diotima agrees. Though true virtue is begotten by the philosopher who is gripped by eros, it is the fact that he gives birth to true virtue that matters ultimately, not the state he is in when doing it, and still less the attitude toward his own state or the objects he produces while in that state.¹²

It should also be noted, however, that what matters for meaning is not all that matters in life. Consider what Wolf says about the alienated housewife when the reader first meets her:

When a person self-consciously looks for something to give her life meaning, it signals a kind of unhappiness. One imagines, for example, the alienated housewife, whose life seems to her to be a series of endless chores. What she wants, it might appear, is something that she can find more subjectively rewarding. (Wolf 2007/2016, 115).¹³

This is exactly right. Like the Exiled Daughter, she wants something that is subjectively rewarding even as she is doing important work. Her work of parenting and supporting a family may be a deep ideal, one that was long dreamed-of and not to be abandoned when the going gets tough. What she wants, though, is that a certain kind of positive feeling attend the efforts to which she has committed herself. But the feelings are missing; the moods, emotions, and propensities that normally draw an agent toward creative or constructive activity are not there. I do not know what these feelings are if not the kind of things found in happy people. Therefore, I would call for us to reject the “ordinary understanding of happiness” and go for a richer one that better captures our intuition about what happiness is and the role it plays in our lives.¹⁴ This conception helps us to see that what the alienated housewife lacks is better

¹² Diotima surely believed that our emotional condition mattered greatly to our ability to be creative and productive. Eros aims at eudaimonia, but one is eudaimon when giving birth in beauty. Elsewhere Plato holds that eros is a divine madness (*Phaedrus* 244a-245c, cf. 265a-b), but this is so because it fires us to exercise deep capacities that are proper to our nature and also helps us to transcend and perfect ourselves.

¹³ “It is the absence of such feelings [sc. fulfillment] (as opposed to the absence of love, for example) that indicates that there is an important good missing in these lives that is not captured by our ordinary understanding of happiness, but which cannot be cashed out purely in terms of objective value either” (Wolf 2010, 113 cf. 113 n.3).

¹⁴ See note 13 above. My paper takes some initial steps down the path recommended by Svensson 2017, namely to examine “more demanding notions of happiness” and their relationship to meaning in life (48, n. 9).

understood as happiness, not meaning or an essential aspect thereof.¹⁵

The alienated housewife and the Exiled Daughter want something worthwhile which at the same time provides them with rewarding experiences. These experiences are the sort that flow from and help to sustain the emotional states that Haybron locates as central to happiness. For him, happiness is “an individual’s responding favorably, in emotional terms, to her life—responding emotionally to her life *as if* things are generally going well for her” (Haybron 2008, 111). This is not a wellbeing or hedonist conception. To be happy on the emotional state theory of happiness is to be in a condition he calls “psychic affirmation” unless it is in a more pronounced form, when it is called “psychic flourishing” (111). He goes on to analyze this into three broad categories of favorable emotional condition: attunement, engagement, and endorsement (112). They need not all be present together, but they are modes of response that correspond to a particular aspect or dimension of happiness. The Exiled Daughter lacks happiness, or she may be in some state of unhappiness.¹⁶ Eventually this might sap the inner resources for doing the work that makes for meaning in her life. But on my view, were this to happen, then the failure to living meaningfully owes not to the presence of a disfavorable emotional condition *per se* but to the effect of that condition on her ability to create value.¹⁷

Fecundity characterizes a life that has very much going for it. It is apt to be a life that is brimming with vitality and happiness, and it is apt, for that very reason, to be a life that produces and promotes objective value. But it is not the case that we do the activity to become happy. It is because we’re happy that we do the activity. We are advised to consider what marks on the world we are capable of leaving, but also what engagements we can focus and sustain long enough to create those marks. The chief insight of a hybrid theory is that it recognizes the importance of objective worth and the role of subjective affinity

¹⁵ “[I]t is a mistake to think that just because someone is yearning for passion he is yearning for meaning” (Bramble 2015, 448).

¹⁶ Paradigmatic cases of unhappiness might answer to one or more of these descriptions, a few of which are true of the Exiled Daughter, Alice the Master Economist, and the variations on Mother Teresa in note 10 above: “being depressed, melancholy, despondent, anxious, ‘stressed out’, seething with rage, overwhelmed by fear, worried sick, heartbroken, grief-stricken, lonely, empty, low, burdened with shame, bored, feeling insecure or worthless, feeling spiritually reduced, pressed-upon or ‘compressed’, or deeply dissatisfied with life.” (Haybron 2008, 49)

¹⁷ Some people might construe long stretches of lack of happiness as being worse, *inter alia*, than sharp but brief bursts of unhappiness, as it relates to the motivations needed to initiate and sustain the work of having or producing experiences, acts, or objects of independent value. One’s judgement on this matter probably has more to do with temperament than principles.

in bringing it about. Ideally, I should consider, among available activities and experiences, which ones are tied to deep features of my nature, and which might sharpen or refine those features in ways that generate more value, or which equip me to be produce value in other areas or endeavors. From the standpoint of meaning, the subjective condition matters as part of what makes our creation and promotion of objective worth more likely.

There is much more that needs to be said about fecundity. It may embrace multiple conceptions of meaning in life—from perfectionist, to utilitarian, and perhaps narrative value (cf. May 2015), among others—and some may be more at home in the concept than others. In addition, some aspects of Haybron’s conception of happiness might be emphasized more than other aspects as it pertains to the creation or promotion of objective worth. Finally, the stress on individuality—with the focus on uniqueness and creativity—may bind fecundity to some cultural contexts more tightly than to others. But as Wolf rightly recommends, we want to preserve the insight that it is better for us when our have active engagement, a propensity to undertake the activity or project in a wholehearted way, and in a way that prompts us to identify with it. But it is also better for us, and fundamental to our life’s meaning, that the activity links up with or creates value of the sort that can be recognized from a third-person standpoint, or which warrants judgements of esteem, respect, and admiration.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I am grateful for very helpful comments from an anonymous reviewer, as well as for audience comments on an earlier version delivered at the Second International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life, at Waseda University, in October 2019.

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Phenomenological Interpretations of Life

Reductivist and Non-Reductivist Approaches in Heidegger, Scheler, Jonas, and Barbaras

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical introduction to the most important phenomenological treatments of life. Formally, we may characterize these treatments as either reductive or non-reductive according to how they situate life ontologically vis-à-vis specifically human life, what the tradition calls “existence.” Whereas reductive or “existentialist” accounts posit an experiential continuum, a single horizon of disclosure articulated by structures which are present to varying *degrees* commensurate with organizational complexity, non-reductive accounts understand life and existence as modes of being in their own right, as defined by regimes of disclosure which are different in *kind*. On my reading, the Heidegger of the 1920s, his student Hans Jonas, and more recently, the French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras fall into the reductivist camp, while the later (post-1930) Heidegger and Max Scheler can be counted among the non-reductivists. After briefly sketching out the respective positions, I suggest arguments in favour of the non-reductivist approach.

1. Introduction: What is Life-Phenomenology?

Life, as with all the foundational concepts of philosophical investigation – being, truth, the good – has the curious property of being at once too near and too far. In one sense, there is no great mystery about life. We can give a more or less stable, consistent, theoretically useful account of life in terms of biochemical states and processes. We can even speculate cogently about the more sublime cosmic origins of life (perhaps microscopic life is carried everywhere throughout the universe by meteoroids, as the theory of panspermia holds). To be sure, there are limit cases and lingering, perhaps insurmountable problems of definition. But on the whole these serve to confirm rather than undermine the strength of the scientific account of life. Indeed, it is that very strength and intelligibility which provide the background against which such problems and limits can first appear and make sense at all, as they do.

In another sense, however, life eludes us entirely. If upon reflection we are

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inclined to describe life, generally speaking, in scientific terms, this is not the way we typically think and talk about life in ordinary language. If I say “Lazarus rose from the dead,” I certainly do not mean that Lazarus suddenly began to maintain homeostasis or that he reacquired the ability to adapt to conditions in his environment. If when baking a loaf of bread I open a sachet of yeast and wonder whether it is alive, it is possible that I am simply asking whether it *works* – but it is equally possible that I am asking a question about what it means to attribute “living” to this little pile of brown dust at all. In this case, I am not asking whether it is in fact capable of performing some kind of energy-yielding chemical exchange, but rather whether that itself and as such bears any relation to, or is in any way commensurate with, what I know and understand of life.

The success of the scientific account of life is due to the way in which it objectifies life. It sets life apart, as the defining feature of living beings, in order to make various empirical, or “ontic,” determinations about it. Life becomes comprehensible just to the extent that it remains something external, other. Even when we apply these empirical determinations to ourselves, it is only insofar as we bring ourselves into focus and take stock of ourselves, from the privileged position of the abstract distance opened up by the theoretical gaze, as equally objectified, as bearers of life taken as a set of features characteristic of certain kinds of organized systems. Likewise, it is only because life is held in focus in this way that local disagreements can arise concerning precisely which features belong to life and which do not. On the other hand, the life that we know and refer to in an average everyday way is manifestly not of this sort. It is rather the life that we know *subjectively*, “from the inside,” as it were. The special vantage point here is not that of the theorist who stands over and against life as an object of study but instead that of *the living* – one who *lives out* or *lives through* life, one for whom life is not merely another thing encountered in the world but rather a condition of encountering anything at all, not something experienced so much as a horizon of experientiality.

Whenever we apprehend life in this way, from out of the midst of its very living, we understand life not ontico-empirically but *ontologically*, as a mode of being definitive of certain kinds of beings. What we see, more precisely, is the way in which what it means to be a being of a certain sort is a matter of what is *given* to such a being and how it, in turn, is open to, encounters, and relates to the given in its givenness. As beings whose way of being is (at least partially) determined by life, we are what we are precisely in our opening up onto, having,

and negotiating what manifests itself to us in just those ways which accord with life.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that in our average everyday understanding of life we carry around and wield sophisticated ontological theories of life. The problem is rather just the opposite. If the scientific account of life makes life intelligible and manageable only at the cost of a certain artificial distancing and objectification of life, the problem with our everyday understanding of life is that life is far too near and intimate to be able to say anything meaningful about it at all. That which puts us in touch with the very being of life at the same time ensures that this being forever escapes us. *What we call the “mystery” of life resides precisely here, in the aporia of life’s ineluctable disclosure in retreat.* To wonder at life is at once our prerogative and our curse. Stranded in the $\chi\acute{o}\rho\alpha$ between absolute knowing and absolute ignorance, we are stirred and solicited by life despite, or rather because of, its very elusiveness. Intuitively, we all know that life exceeds – *essentially* – the sum of its biochemical concomitants, but the *meaning* of this excess seems structurally and permanently out of reach.

When we ponder the possibility and meaning of the life of that sachet of yeast, we are above all questioning the silent ontological assumptions of the scientific account itself. We are asking, in essence, whether and how anything like a “living out” can be attributed to this stuff – whether it admits of any sort of relation to the given in its givenness, even formally. Of course we do not doubt that this stuff does what science says it does. Rather we are asking if that is all life really *is*. Is this stuff “open” in any meaningful sense? Does anything “appear” to it in any way, and how? And does that matter? It is in this way that reflection on the empirical determinants of life quietly but inevitably passes over into philosophical speculation about the being of life.

How, then, shall we approach life in its most mysterious aspect? Can philosophy provide any insight into what our everyday proximity to life always already withholds from us? Does philosophy have any resources by means of which we might step into the midst of actually lived life and describe what is given to life in the specificity of its givenness?

Generally speaking, whenever philosophy situates itself within the midst of the given in order to isolate and describe some cohesive set of formal structures of givenness, it is phenomenology. Formal structures here means neither empirico-psychological features nor *a priori* transcendental conditions, but rather something like “schemata” which articulate and specify an ontologically

determinate horizon of disclosure. Methodologically, then, phenomenology necessarily begins with some procedure of “bracketing” (*epoché*), a shifting of orientation or perspective by which the so-called “natural attitude” characteristic of unreflective, pre-philosophical daily life is suspended or disqualified in order that the particular horizon at issue (pure consciousness, being-in-the-world, perception etc.) can be set off and held in focus. In this way the given is apprehended not as *object* but precisely *as given* in conformity with these schemata, that is, as *phenomenon*. To take a simple and classic example, when I stand at the lectern, I position myself vis-à-vis an object of a certain size, shape, texture, and weight, and with a certain number of sides etc. From the perspective of pure consciousness, however, all that is ever *given* to me is a never-ending series of partial images, or “adumbrations,” that together constitute an objective unity structurally shot through with incompleteness, negation (such that I never have the “whole” object in view, or more precisely, there is a “hole” structured into and constitutive of the “whole” itself).

To ask whether and how we might situate ourselves in the midst of life with an eye to its concrete *being-lived* is thus simply to ask about the possibility of a phenomenology of life. It is to ask whether we can in fact discover any such general experiential forms or patterns that would justify an interpretation of life as a horizon of openness in its own right. More specifically, it means asking whether any being that can be said to partake of this experiential horizon “has” things in certain ways that are exclusive to such partaking and therefore withheld from all beings we regard as standing outside it. To return to our yeast example, if we were to attribute life to this pile of dust in a phenomenological and not merely a biochemical sense (and ignoring as irrelevant the *metaphysical* problem of the possible relation between these), this would mean committing ourselves to the view that the yeast “has” things in ways that non-living entities (actual dust, for example) do not – ways that, moreover, are *formally identical* to the “ways-of-having” characteristic of *everything* that lives (whether plankton or people). What would such a “having” entail? Or, put differently, what does it mean *to be* in a “living” sort of way?

2. Reductivist and Non-Reductivist Approaches to Life

Historically, philosophical attempts to provide a phenomenological account of life have tended to fall into two general camps, what I will call *reductivist* and

non-reductivist. On the reductivist side I count, for example, the early Heidegger, his student Hans Jonas, and the contemporary French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras. On the non-reductivist side I include the later (roughly post-1929) Heidegger and Max Scheler. *Reductivists* are so named because they posit a single mode of being, “life,” of which the way of being characteristic of human beings, what the tradition calls “existence,” is only a particular moment or local modification. At the same time, the description of the *lived content* of life is modelled on human existence itself as life’s most advanced form and the completion of its “evolutionary ascent.” The reductivist itinerary is succinctly expressed by Jonas when he writes in *The Phenomenon of Life* that his aim is to provide “an ‘existential’ interpretation of biological facts” so as to “recover the inner dimension” which is necessary “for the understanding of things organic.”¹ Reductivism, in other words, proceeds in two directions at once: *ontologically* it collapses existence into (a mode of) life, while *ontically* it arrives at the concrete reality of life by way of a “privation” of the basic structures of existence (the so-called “*existentialia*”) as the end and summit of life’s own teleological unfolding. (For this reason, we may use the terms reductivist, existentialist, and teleological interchangeably.) *Non-reductivists* naturally reject this approach. In place of an unbroken chain of being culminating in “existential life,” they posit a kind of “ontological surprise” irrupting into being itself – the spontaneous emergence of an entirely *sui generis* field of manifestation and relation.

2.1. Reductivism: Early Heidegger, Jonas, Barbaras

Reductivism can be characterized as a form of onto-phenomenological monism. This does not mean a metaphysical theory according to which the totality of being is conscious or pre-conscious (though it is certainly compatible with such a view: Jonas himself advances a neo-Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* whereby human Spirit is “adumbrated” in the lowest forms of inorganic matter). Rather it means only that the principal distinction to be drawn is between non-openness and openness *simpliciter*; in positing a single horizon of openness, it treats all openness as such as formally-ontologically identical. This horizon is known simply as *world*. World, Jonas says, is “the basic setting for experience – a horizon of co-reality thrown open by life.”² In the same way, for the early Heidegger, the

¹ Jonas (2001), p. xxiii.

² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

“phenomenological category, ‘world,’ immediately names...what is lived, the content aimed at in living, that which life holds to.”³ The *essence* of life is therefore “*being-in-a-world*,” such that anything that lives, from protozoa to primates, must be said to have a world. That the terms “life” and “world” have the same fundamental meaning, Heidegger says, is expressed in ordinary language by the fact that “the one word can stand in for the other: e.g. ‘to go out into life,’ ‘out into the world’; ‘to live totally in one’s world,’ ‘totally in one’s life.’”⁴ In a passage that will surely sound strange to anyone familiar only with his later work, Heidegger insists on the basic and irreducible enworldedness of all living beings:

Life is that kind of reality which is in a world and indeed in such a way that it has a world. Every living creature has its environing world not as something extant next to it but as something that is there for it as disclosed, uncovered...[Biologists] are now reflecting on the fundamental structure of the animal. But we miss the essential thing here if we don’t see that the animal has a world. In the same way, we too are always in a world in such a way that it is disclosed for us.⁵

Accordingly, onto-phenomenological monism implies that all differences in the lived content of life can amount only to *ontico-empirical* differences in the world-relation itself. If human existence and plant and animal life are not separated by an unbridgeable “abyss,” then there is only ever being-in-a-world *more or less*..., a continuum of what Jonas describes as “rising degrees of world-perception” and “scope and distinctness of experience” culminating in the human λόγος. Both Jonas and the early Heidegger share this teleological view of the ontologico-evolutionary ascent of life. Jonas leaves no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation here:

[There] is always the purposiveness of organism as such and its concern in living: effective already in all vegetative tendency, awakening to primordial awareness in the dim reflexes, the responding irritability of lowly organisms; more so in urge and effort and anguish of animal life endowed with motility and sense-organs; reaching self-transparency in

³ Heidegger (2001), p. 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Heidegger (2002), p. 163.

consciousness, will and thought of man: all these being inward aspects of the teleological side...of “matter.”⁶

Indeed, Jonas traces the line of ascent to humanity back to bare matter itself, whose properties “found their opportunity along the course of mechanical evolution to realize, in the seeming automatism of causal sequence, some of the hidden potentialities of original substance: of which realization we are instances.”⁷ Conversely, “the more we descend to the lower rungs of the ladder of life-forms,” the more do these “hidden potentialities” dissolve back into their primordially constitutive elements, first into “obscure sensations” and the “elementary stimulation of organic irritability,” and ultimately into the “primeval restlessness of metabolizing substance”⁸ itself. Heidegger, likewise, although he shares none of Jonas’s idealist metaphysical leanings, advances essentially the same view. When Heidegger writes that “[everything] that is alive, to the extent that it exists, has a *world*, which does not hold for what is not alive,”⁹ it is clear that he is treating “existence” as the highest expression of life insofar as it involves the greatest “extent” of world. The essential point, to be clear, is not merely that the horizon of life expands and contracts corollary to the external development of the organism, but more fundamentally, that the ontologically defining features of life are already present, *in nuce*, even in the most primitive and germinal manifestations of life. This is why Heidegger can claim that even the most rudimentary life-form “knows about itself, even if only in the dullest way and in the broadest sense.”¹⁰ Whereas a stone, say, is simply “on hand,” even a “very primitive unicellular form of life...will already find itself,” though such self-finding (*Befindlichkeit*) may be no more than “the greatest and darkest dullness.”¹¹

As for these ontologically defining features themselves, the lived substance of being-in-the-world, it is now easy to see that a certain “method” is implied. For if life is an experiential continuum of which the human stands at and as the summit in virtue of a “psychological totality which represents the maximum of concrete ontological completeness,” it follows that the essential meaning of this lived

⁶ Jonas (2001), p. 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3, 99.

⁹ Heidegger (2007), p. 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8.

¹¹ Heidegger (1992), p. 255.

substance is “determined by way of progressive ontological subtraction,”¹² a kind of “reductive biology” whereby, as Heidegger says, we “determine the worldhood of the animal by certain modified ways of considering”¹³ our own world-relation. Now *we* know life just insofar as, and in the way that, we ourselves live it, namely, as *resistance* to what stands over and against us as a domain of opposition and constraint. For reductivists, accordingly, *alienation* is the basic experience and setting of all life: the living being forges its “internal identity,” first awakens to self-consciousness, in the struggle with finitude, its Sisyphean reckoning with the external powers that confront it and ultimately threaten it with death. In his summer semester lectures from 1925, Heidegger gives the example of a snail crawling out of its shell. Is the snail “in” its environment in the way that water is “in” a glass? Does the snail first encounter a world only by reaching itself out to something which it thereby, in and through such reaching, discovers as “not-itself”? By no means. Rather, having a world is the *a priori* condition of its reaching out and encountering anything to begin with. The snail’s crawling out of its shell, Heidegger writes, “is but a local modification of its already-being-in-the-world. Even when it is in its shell, its being is a being-outside, rightly understood. It is not in its shell like water in the glass”; rather “it has a world” from the beginning and essentially.¹⁴ But what sort of world is this? Fundamentally, “a world described as standing over and against it, an opposition which it broaches by first crawling out.” Jonas takes this abstract idea of the world as a zone of originary “opposition” to its logical conclusion. For Jonas, the dawn of life is itself “the emergence, with life as such, of internal identity,” but in that very emergence, life’s “self-isolation too from all the rest of reality.” Thus –

Profound singleness and heterogeneousness within a universe of homogeneously interrelated existence mark the selfhood of organism. An identity which from moment to moment reasserts itself, achieves itself, and defies the equalizing forces of physical sameness all around, is truly pitted against the rest of things. In the hazardous polarization thus ventured upon by emerging life, that which is not itself and borders on the realm of internal identity from without assumes at once the character of absolute otherness. The challenge of selfhood qualifies all this beyond the boundaries of the

¹² Jonas (2001), pp. 23-4.

¹³ Heidegger (1992), p. 222.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-6.

organism as foreign and somehow opposite: as “world,” in which, by which, and against which it is committed to maintain itself. Without this universal counterpart of otherness, there would be no “self.”¹⁵

We are not far from the philosophy of Fichte here, for whom “infinite striving,” the “ceaseless struggle against a hostile world,” is “the condition of the possibility of all objects, of experiencing a world opposed to our activity.”¹⁶ Just as for Fichte neither self nor world can appear except in and through their mutual limitation, so too for Jonas and early Heidegger life just *is* the opening up of a zone of opposition *tout court*. Such opposition is the *meaning* of the “in” of the living being’s “being-in” its world.

Although he comes armed with a more sophisticated conceptual toolkit, the contemporary French phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras takes essentially the same view. Like Jonas and early Heidegger, Barbaras thinks “existence in terms of life,” that is, not an addition to life “but only a new dimension of life.”¹⁷ Moreover, “that to which life relates and that at which life is aimed”¹⁸ is the unitary horizon of “world,” which, as before, is described as inherently provocative and “alienating,” such that life is condemned to eternal restlessness and unsatisfactoriness. The main difference is that whereas Jonas, for example, understands alienation in terms of the threat of lost continuity of being (in short, of death), Barbaras locates it more anciently, in the nature of manifestation, i.e. “be-ing,” as such.

Life, Barbaras writes, “is the condition of the appearance of a being that is absent from what presents it.”¹⁹ Because being necessarily retreats and recedes behind the manifold “adumbrations” by and through which it appears, “the being offers itself up to an exploration that is, in principle, unending.” For Barbaras, this *a priori* incompleteness and opacity of the world are the ontological corollary of a *movement* out toward the world. By a logic which is never entirely made clear (and which non-reductivism will call out and contest, even if only implicitly), it is precisely because the world “continuously slips away from the gaze that it is given as the end or goal of a movement.” The being solicits in its very withdrawal – “it offers itself up as a weak directionality because it cannot be possessed in an

¹⁵ Jonas (2001), pp. 82-3.

¹⁶ Beiser (2009), p. 312.

¹⁷ Barbaras (2003), p. 161.

¹⁸ Barbaras (2008), p. 15.

¹⁹ Barbaras (2012), p. 99.

intuition.”²⁰

Life, in short, is “desire,” that is, an impossible yet irrepressible drawing nearer toward what, if the integrity of life itself is to be conserved, can and must never come forth to meet or fulfil it. Desire does not first experience an object to which it subsequently draws near; just to the contrary, “it only experiences its object in advancing towards it,” in the sense that “it does not become conscious of its object except through the momentum with which it approaches it.” Thus insofar as desire is always already too late, “what desire reaches exacerbates as much as appeases it.” Desire “never meets its object except in the mode of the object’s own absence, and this is why nothing stops it.” It follows that what “fulfils” desire “only serves to further hollow it out,” which is “why it can only be effectuated as movement.” Life is what Plato called a “leaky jar”: it is the “insatiable advance of desire” which corresponds to “the non-positive excess of the world.”²¹

It therefore matters little that Barbaras faults Jonas’s account for being too death centred. It is not the *fact* of finitude to which Barbaras objects, but only its origin and logic. Non-being does not stand opposed to being as subject to object, but rather inscribes the object itself and from the beginning. Accordingly, Barbaras arrives at the same fundamental interpretation of life, though by a different route and in a more originary sense. Life remains “an attempt at self-realization” through “the mediation of an other” that resists it, only now resistance is understood in terms not of a “defiance” of the “equalizing forces of physical sameness” (Jonas) but of an originary self-refusal of the world itself. There is no *essential* break here with the interpretations of Jonas and early Heidegger. Where Heidegger speaks of the “opposition” of the world and Jonas the radical “fitfulness” and “deep anxiety of biological existence,”²² Barbaras invokes the romantic language of being “condemned” to a perpetual “longing” for the world. “Subjectivity is precisely the unity of this loss and this longing” – life “refers back to the event of a loss of its existence that takes the form of a longing.” If life is “characterized by a fundamental alienation,” this means not any struggle against hostile external forces but rather its *a priori* condition, “a lack of Being that prohibits [the subject] from ever fully being what it is and without which it would not even begin to desire, and hence, exist.” Life signals the birth of a *self to be*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

²² Jonas (2001), pp. 90, 106, 96.

realized in and through its pursuit of a world that structurally refuses it. As “a search for the self in the other,” life “is condemned to a never-ending quest, the insatiability of which is the measure of the subject’s self-privation.”²³ Such originary privation is “the advent of living being” – a “living that refers back to life as a form of scission deep within its core, that is to say, fundamentally, as its negation.”²⁴

2.2. Non-Reductivism: The Later Heidegger and Scheler

For non-reductivists, the central problem with the teleological-existential view of life is that it leaves no room for the specificity of *human* life, which is now understood simply as a qualitatively enhanced manifestation of life in general. Ultimately the thesis of ontological continuity breaks down inasmuch as, if all life is an originary unsatisfactoriness vis-à-vis the world, we are compelled to maintain that even primitive life is constituted by what seem to be paradigmatically human forms of experience. If I see a garden snail munching on a leaf, there is a high burden of proof to meet indeed if I am to insist that the best interpretation of what this creature is doing is that it is fighting to maintain the integrity of its felt experience of selfhood against a hostile external world or, still more abstractly, that it is irresistibly solicited by the structural negation lurking at the heart of being itself. This raises the suspicion that reductivism is motivated above all by *ethical* concerns – and indeed it is clear that Jonas, for example, and for precisely this reason, simply cannot make up his mind about the ontological status of human life. At the very same time he claims that all life is subject to evolutionary ascent, he carves out a special subset of *sui generis* human faculties – representation, memory, self-creation – which emerge fully formed. But in that case, why does this special class of properties not also extend to such things as awareness of self and anxiety about death? Conversely, why do these special faculties not likewise appear in “rising degrees”?²⁵

Precisely these concerns are what motivate the non-reductivist theories of Scheler and the later Heidegger. The early Heidegger could advance a teleologico-existential view of life on account of the fact that his main concern was rescuing life from what he saw as its illegitimate though near constant objectification by

²³ Barbaras (2012), pp. 101-2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁵ See e.g. Johnson (2014).

the tradition from Plato onward. Thus Heidegger writes that the entire subject-object schema “fundamentally and forever obstructs access to that which we have indicated with the term ‘factual life.’”²⁶ Operating within this schema, “the basic phenomenon of being-in-the-world does not come into view.”²⁷ In opposition to all theoretical “de-interpretation” and “de-vivification” of life,²⁸ Heidegger describes life as pure openness – a primordial “it lives” (*es lebt*) or, insofar as all living is in, through, against etc. a world, “it worlds” (*es weltet*) *simpliciter*.²⁹ Given the focus of this early philosophical itinerary, it is not surprising that Heidegger would, at this stage, think life in wholly universal terms. When the agenda is principally one of destructing all overly “theoretical” accounts of the subject, there is no reason not to regard animals and even plants as partaking of the same being-in-the-world as human beings, though to lesser degrees. Life (ζωή), Heidegger insists, “refers to a *mode of being*, indeed a mode of *being-in-a-world*. A living thing is not simply at hand (*vorhanden*), but is in a world in that it has a world. An animal is not simply moving down the road, pushed along by some mechanism. It is in the world in the sense of having it.”³⁰ It is only later, in the process of working through the implications of his fundamental ontology, that Heidegger recognizes and clarifies that the kind of world-relation he has been describing could only first arise at all if it supervened on deeper structures (namely, time and what it makes possible, an understanding of being) that were, to all appearances (specifically, the living being’s *alolia* as the “sign” of the absence of such structures), the ontological prerogative of certain living beings exclusively, namely, us ourselves – and accordingly insists on an essential rupture *within* the open itself.

This “turn” in Heidegger’s thinking about life, though long in preparation, is accomplished quite suddenly. As late as 1927, Heidegger is still speaking (cautiously, to be sure) in terms of a continuum of life ranging from the “mere” life of plants and animals to the “existential” life of human beings, and thus of the possibility of “making out reductively” how the animal might experience its “world.”³¹ By the time of the seminal winter semester lectures on theoretical biology two years later (titled *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World,*

²⁶ Heidegger (2008), p. 63.

²⁷ Heidegger (2009), p. 40.

²⁸ Heidegger (2000), pp. 75-6.

²⁹ Heidegger (2001), p. 65.

³⁰ Heidegger (2009), p. 14.

³¹ Heidegger (1982), pp. 190-1.

Finitude, Solitude), however, the problematic has shifted entirely. Inasmuch as it was simply a matter of emancipating the primordial openness of the “it lives/worlds” from all occluding and inappropriate objectification, Heidegger had no trouble invoking the “very simple” world of a “primitive animal,”³² and even speculating about the possibility of understanding the animal’s world “by certain modified ways of considering” our own world. By contrast, once it is determined that the animal is “poor in world” (*weltarm*) – that whatever the animal “has,” it does not have beings qua beings – such an itinerary becomes unintelligible. For in that case “it is *not* simply a question of a *qualitative otherness* of the animal world as compared with the human world, and especially not a question of quantitative distinctions in range, depth, and breadth” – as in any reductive account of “primitive” being-in-the-world. Indeed, “it is not a question of whether or how the animal takes what is given to it in a different way, but rather of whether or how the animal can apprehend something *as* something, something *as* a being, at all. If it cannot, then the animal is separated from man by an abyss.”³³ Accordingly, the 1929-30 lectures are concerned above all with “finding out what constitutes the *essence of the animality* of the animal and the *essence of the humanity* of man,” and the former by way of an ontological determination of “the *living character of a living being*” as such³⁴ – and indeed Heidegger pauses no fewer than seven times in the first thirty pages of the biology material to remind us, often emphatically, that “life” and “living-being” refer always and exclusively to the plant-being of the plant and the animal-being of the animal, never to the human-being, the “existence,” of the human.

Heidegger’s contemporary Max Scheler held a similar position about life. Like the later Heidegger, Scheler argued that human reality exhibited structures and properties that were different *in kind* from those observed in all other living beings, and therefore that human beings, though undoubtedly “alive,” could never be defined *ontologically* by their participation in life. Human reality is not simply “above” life, but rather situated on an entirely different plane of being – the plane of *spirit*. This “novel phenomenon” is not merely “an addition to the psychic levels of impulsion, instinct, associative memory, [and] intelligence.” Rather, “[this] new principle is *beyond* what we call ‘life’ in the widest meaning of the word. What makes the human being a ‘human’ is not a new level of life,” but

³² Heidegger (2002), p. 163.

³³ Heidegger (1995), p. 264.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

something “*opposite anything we call life, including life in the human being: it is a genuinely new, essential fact which cannot at all be reduced to the ‘natural evolution of life.’* If reducible to anything at all, this new principle leads us back to the one ultimate Ground of all entities of which life happens to be one particular manifestation.”³⁵

In his last published work, the short text *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (an expanded version of a presentation titled “The Special Place of Humankind” delivered at a conference in 1927, one year before his death and two years before Heidegger’s *Fundamental Concepts* lectures), Scheler defines the essence of spirit in terms of an “*existential detachment from organic being.*” In other words, “a being having spirit is not tied anymore to its drives and environment, but is ‘non-environmental,’” that is, “‘world-open’: such a being has ‘world.’”³⁶ As with the later Heidegger, “world” is thought as the horizon of manifestation of beings qua beings. Whereas merely living beings “are ecstatically immersed in their environs,” a being that partakes of spirit “turns its centres of resistance and reaction into ‘objects’ in order to grasp the ‘what’ of all objects itself.” Spirit, therefore, involves “matter-of-factness” (*Sachlichkeit*) in that it is “determinable by ‘what’ things themselves are.” Whereas an animal “is unable to turn the environment into an object” – that is, “is not removed from its environment and does not have distance from its environment so as to be able to transform its ‘environment’ into ‘world’” – in contrast, “*the being of objects is the most formal category of the logical side of spirit.*”³⁷

This lack of “*Seinsverständnis,*” “being-understanding,” implies, *a fortiori*, that the animal, despite being conscious, can never possess that inward subjective consolidation or “in-gathering” (*Sammlung*) which we call “self” and “selfhood.” Unlike “the simple reporting-back of the contents of an animal’s lived body schema, the human spiritual act is tied essentially to a second dimension or second level of the act of reflection,” namely, “‘concentration on one’s own self,’ or the consciousness of the spiritual act-centre of itself, ‘self-consciousness.’” An animal, to be sure, is “conscious,” but it “does not own itself, it has no power over itself – and this is why it is also not aware of itself.”³⁸ This, in turn, suggests that the essence of the reductive-existential picture of life – namely, life as a congenital

³⁵ Scheler (2009), p. 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

“fitfulness” and “unsatisfactoriness” vis-à-vis what stands over and against it as hostile, alien, foreign, inaccessible otherness – is unintelligible and untenable. For it is precisely because “an animal does not have a specific kind of self-centredness that unifies all sense data with its respective drive impulses and that releases the *one ‘world’* ordered by the senses” that it has no experience of that “lack which is not a lack of this or that” (as Merleau-Ponty calls it³⁹) which lurks at the root of all desire. Rather, desire “can only occur in a being having spirit and whose lack of satisfaction of its drives is always more than its satisfaction.” What the animal lacks, in short, is the *temporal* dimension that first opens up that horizon of *expectation* – the experience of *never enough*, the ceaseless approach to the *ever-still-outstanding* – on which desire necessarily depends. Thus, “[we] call ‘empty’ what remains unsatisfied in the expectations of our drives – the primary ‘emptiness’ which is, as it were, the emptiness in our hearts.”⁴⁰ Man is “an eternal ‘Faust’ or a *bestia cupidissima rerum novarum*,” one who “is never at peace with his environing world,” “always eager to break through the borders of now-here-whatness,” and “always desirous to *transcend* the reality surrounding him, including the reality of his own self.”⁴¹ Being may very well be inscribed with an irreparable negation, as Barbaras maintains, but this fact is *meaningful* only to beings who are already “temporally primed,” as it were, to perceive it – and in perceiving it, to first *become* a subject *as the subject of it*, that is, as stirred and solicited by it, as essentially lacking or unrealized vis-à-vis being’s immanent withdrawal and concealment. This is why, unlike the animals, “who always say ‘Yes’ to reality – even when they fear and flee – the human being is the ‘Naysayer,’ he is an *ascetic of life*; he is an eternal protester against all mere reality.”⁴²

It is easy to see that non-reductivism is at a relative disadvantage when it comes to describing and interpreting the structures and meaning of “mere” life, for it is no longer a matter of simply “modifying” – paring down and peeling away – the contents of our own lived-experience to arrive at “the worldhood of the animal.” Rather we must attempt a procedure which is more akin to Bergsonian intuition than Husserlian *epoché*. Whereas for Jonas the reality of life is laid bare by “progressive ontological subtraction” from the “maximum of concrete ontological completeness” which is man, for Scheler the essence of life can only

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2003), p. 155.

⁴⁰ Scheler (2009), pp. 31-2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

be glimpsed by means of something like what Foucault will later call “limit-experiences” – an attempt to neutralize or “inactivate” spirit. “If we try to place ourselves into the everyday state of an animal’s being,” Scheler writes, “we would have to think of very rare human ecstatic states – as they occur, for instance, during the receding stages of hypnosis, or during the intake of certain drugs, and we would also have to think of techniques that inactivate spirit, such techniques as are used by orgiastic cults.”⁴³

Much hay has been made of this interpretation of animal consciousness (the experiential content of life in general, in fact) as akin to drugged, doped, orgiastic, or hypnotized human consciousness, life as a rhapsody of impressions. It is true that both the later Heidegger and Scheler describe the living being as driven around within its “environment ring.” Scheler’s claim that living beings “are ecstatically immersed in their environs,” whereby “[the] structure of the environment fits exactly to, and is ‘fixated’ in, the physiological peculiarity of an animal,” such that everything it experiences “in its environment is securely embedded in the frame and *boundary of its environment*,”⁴⁴ is perfectly echoed in Heidegger’s own claim that “[being] open in captivity is the *essential possession* of the animal,” such that the animal’s “being held captive to the disinhibiting ring” is “*a having of that which disinhibits*.”⁴⁵ But here we should be sensitive to the full difficulty of the task at hand. The point is not to *deny* things to life so much as to circumscribe what belongs most properly to life. Thus just as Heidegger suggests that the openness of life may be so rich and abundant that “the human world may have nothing to compare”⁴⁶ it with, so too Scheler goes so far as to claim that “[gifts], readiness to help, reconciliation, and similar observable facts one can find already among animals.”⁴⁷ The problem is not the potential experiential richness of life but how this richness is to be interpreted – how, in other words, to think a kind of primordial Fichtean “resistance” of things which would be anterior to any “hermeneutic” disclosure, that is, any givenness of things *as the things that they are*, and still less *as beings* as such. This is what Scheler is getting at when he says that a living being “does not experience its drives as *its* drives but as dynamic attractions or rejections coming from *things* in its

⁴³ Scheler (2009), pp. 29-30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

⁴⁵ Heidegger (1995), pp. 269-70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁴⁷ Scheler (2009), p. 25.

environment.”⁴⁸ “Things” in this sense are not *beings* but rather something like *nodes of resistance*, densities of attractiveness and repulsiveness *simpliciter*; the idea is that something can manifest itself not as an attractive or repulsive being but merely *as attractive* or *as repulsive* as such.

Heidegger floats a similar view in his Aristotle lectures from the mid-1920s (technically still carried out within the framework of a continuity theory of being-in-the-world, but there is nothing here that, in principle, the post-1930 Heidegger could not agree with). In these lectures, animal life is defined not by *νοῦς*, a pure observation or theoretical knowing, but rather by *ὄρεξις*, “desire” as a yearning or longing going-out-toward an *ὀρεκτόν*, a “desirable” *simpliciter*. Desire indicates the way in which the world *matters* to animals; it takes the form, not of an insatiable restlessness vis-à-vis the ineliminable provocations of non-being, but rather and simply of a *δίωξις* or *φύξις* (or *φύγη*), a pursuit or avoidance (or flight), vis-à-vis what is disclosed and engaged as *διακείμενον* and *ἀντικείμενον*, the “disposed-to” and “opposed-to” *as such*. There exists, in other words, an entirely *sui generis orectic* form of manifestation: things can stand unconcealed, indeed can stand in a certain kind of “truth” (*ἀλήθεια*), and yet not “be” anything at all *sensu stricto*. Through *ἄφή*, “contact,” life orients itself to what discloses itself *as* favourable or threatening, *as* desirable or undesirable, *as* *διακείμενον* or *ἀντικείμενον*: an animal crawls up a tree trunk “so that it has the trunk in a certain way *as its obstacle*, so that the trunk with which it is there is nonetheless there for it *as διακείμενον, ἀντικείμενον* for the animal through *ἄφή*, through ‘contact.’”⁴⁹

This attempt to think resistance without being is what separates the “deepest and darkest dullness” predicated of primitive or “mere,” that is, *qualitatively reduced* or *subtracted*, life from the “benumbing” (*Benommenheit*) which Scheler and the later Heidegger posit as the essence of life taken as a mode of being in its own right. The latter represents not a lesser form of life but rather how life is destined to appear to *us* when we try to *deactivate* or *step outside* the source and substance of our very humanity.

3. Conclusion: The Case for Non-Reductivism

What I wish to suggest, in closing, is that non-reductivism has the upper hand not only theoretically but above all ethically. Phenomenologically speaking, life

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁹ Heidegger (2009), p. 220 (emphasis added).

is the mode of being concomitant with the spontaneous opening up of a zone of solicitation and repulsion. It is originary *movement* in the form of a ceaseless drawing-toward and pushing-away-from things – things which give themselves not as “beings” to pursue or to avoid but as the pursuable and avoidable as such, as it were. To live means simply to dwell in the midst of this zone, *in the manner of* such a movement. Conversely, what we call human existence is not just a more sophisticated manifestation or expression of such movement but rather a mode of being in its own right – one defined, at the most elementary level, by the experience of *time*. The immediate upshot of this is that we obviate entirely the kinds of problems that seem inevitable for reductivism (whose *reductio ad absurdum* is the existential angst of plants and protozoa). The “fundamental incompleteness” and radical “experience of dispossession”⁵⁰ which reductivists such as Barbaras claim to discover at the heart of life are essentially *temporal* phenomena. As Levinas puts it, “in Desire there is no sinking one’s teeth into being, no satiety, but *an uncharted future before me.*”⁵¹ The negation of the world is here not mere logical not-being but rather the deeper, existential *non-being* of *unfulfillment*. This means that Barbaras’s effort to “think existence in terms of life” ultimately fails; his “‘additive’ anthropology” does not “replace the privative zoology”⁵² of the early Heidegger and Jonas but rather smuggles it in from the start as its silent presupposition.

The problem with non-reductivism, on the other hand, at least as we are inclined to see it today, is that it appears to be *ethically* dubious in the way in which it cannot avoid “denying” certain things to non-human living creatures, such as the capacity to truly *die* as opposed to merely “perish” (Derrida, for one, famously addresses this issue in works such as *Of Spirit* and *The Animal That Therefore I Am*). Indeed, Jonas’s own life-phenomenology was motivated mainly by ethical concerns insofar as he thought that our technological transformation, now bordering on annihilation, of nature was due in large part to our failure to understand life in the context of the continuity and interconnectedness of the totality of being.

As I see it, however, this is to get things backwards. Our technological domination and decimation of nature – the whole monstrous techno-capitalist juggernaut which now threatens us with collective destruction in the form of the

⁵⁰ Barbaras (2008), pp. 14-15.

⁵¹ Levinas (1969), p. 117 (emphasis added).

⁵² Barbaras (2003), p. 161.

climate emergency, and the will to power that underpins and fuels it – stems *precisely* from that constitutional restlessness, unsatisfactoriness, and anxiety which reductivists are so eager to discover in life itself. This is why there is always something slightly sinister in the blind urge to demote the human to a mere animal and to “elevate” the animal to a human being (formally, if always to a lesser extent). The problem is not merely that the animal is *presumed* to *lack* something vis-à-vis the human – not simply, in other words, that the thing which is left out is assumed to be something *inherently good* such that its omission *in itself* entails a kind of violence to the animal. The problem is instead that this purportedly good thing of which the animal is deprived is precisely that which, if present, would implicate it in the most obscene forms of violence – just as, by the same token, the human being’s own singular responsibility for such violence would be correspondingly blurred, muted, redistributed among life as such and as a whole. For if the radical, constitutional insatiability which compels the will to power is a product of the restlessness *of life as such*, then man no longer owns it – it is simply “the way of Nature.” The difference between an animal catching its prey on the one hand and the will to infinite, exponential growth on the other becomes one of *degree*, not of kind. The animal is gripped by the same will to power as that which drives, say, the typical Wall Street banker or the board of directors of Exxon Mobil; what it lacks is merely the “intelligence” necessary for implementing its will more “efficiently.” Conversely, and for the same reason, bending, crushing, and ransacking Nature is rendered justifiable and acceptable on the grounds that “Nature is cruel” – that is, Nature’s principle is the general one of which the main principle of human social interaction under the conditions of late capitalism (“Every man for himself”) is only a local and limited instance. If human beings are undoubtedly brutal, it is only because Nature itself is brutal, and we are, after all, a part and product of general Nature. Such are the problematic (if hidden) implications of reductivism.

We should, I claim, be quite dogmatic on this point. Even if it could be shown that animals (above all, the so-called “higher” animals) exhibit some behaviours or capacities that appear to confirm the thesis of reductivism, nevertheless such a thesis should be *withdrawn and withheld on principle and entirely a priori*, *not* in order to reduce living beings to the status of objects to be manipulated and tossed aside by power, but rather so that they are *absolved in advance* of any responsibility for the consequences of power, or more precisely, for the effects of that sense of radical neediness and unsatisfactoriness that elicits and propels the

human existent's insatiable lust for power. The surest sign that plants and animals are not like us is not that they do not speak but that they do not *produce* – that is, produce *like us*, in conformity to the inexorable, all-consuming logic of the will to more..., of *desire*. The way of Nature, Bataille pointed out a century ago, is growth followed by exudation, waste. Of all the known beings in the universe, only human beings reinvest their waste for the sake of ever more growth *ad infinitum*, with catastrophic consequences. If we thus deny plants and animals the word or the capacity to die, this is only in order that we might secure their innocence by denying them any complicity in the crimes which the beings in possession of those faculties have thus far been powerless to stop themselves from committing. The rampant devastation we are presently witnessing all around us is not merely an exacerbation of phenomena we encounter everywhere in Nature, but rather the profoundest expression of *what we are*. The ethical advantage of non-reductivism lies precisely here, namely, in that it both makes it possible and invites us to own up to our own actions.

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A Stoic Approach to Living a Meaningful Life

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Abstract

In this paper I set out to accomplish two tasks. First, I develop a criterion as to what accounts for a satisfactory account of life's meaningfulness. Second, I use this criterion to evaluate four accounts of life's meaning, including Stoicism, existentialism, cosmological nihilism, and the theological purposive account. I argue that, in light of the criterion, that both cosmological nihilism and the theological purposive account are inadequate. While the existentialism account does meet the conditions of the criterion, it ignores important features of what it means to be human—the subject of what kind of meaningful life we are concerned with. Given that the Stoic account meets the criterion while correctly accounting for what it means to be human, I argue that Stoicism is a viable approach to understanding the meaning of life.

1. Introduction

The meaning of life has been a central question of philosophy, going back at least as far as Plato (C. 424-348 BCE). In his *Apology*, Plato recounts Socrates' famous statement that “The unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ By assuming that Socrates is correct, not only do we come to understand that a life that is worth living will be a meaningful one, but we also understand that the meaning of life involves reflection and for a person to live meaningfully she should examine life, including her own.

There have been more contemporary attempts to answer questions regarding life's meaning and how to live meaningfully.² While these are certainly important and worthwhile attempts to better understand the meaning of life, I believe more historical texts, in particular those provided by the Stoics, also offer significant contributions to our attempts to develop an understanding of life's meaning. This approach of appealing to the Stoics is consistent with the Modern Stoicism movement to better understand and resolve contemporary philosophical problems

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¹ Plato (2002), 38a5-6

² Notably Metz (2013).

through the implementation of Stoic techniques and texts.³ While Stoicism has generally been viewed as a *philosophy of life*, as far as I am aware, there has not been any formal discussion regarding *the* meaning of life and Stoicism.⁴

In this paper, I look specifically at the works of Musonius Rufus (30-100 CE), Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BCE-65 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (121-80 CE) to answer the questions regarding the meaning of a human life and what it means for a person to live meaningfully. For the purposes of succinctness, I refer to answers to these interrelated questions as *the account of life's meaning*. In what follows, I discuss some potential skeptical concerns with even attempting to give an account of life's meaning. These skeptical concerns provide a foundation for developing a criterion of satisfactoriness for an account of life's meaning. I then argue that the Stoic's account of life's meaning fulfills this criterion. In subsequent sections, I assess the extent to which examples of existentialism, cosmological nihilism, and theistic externalism fulfill the criterion's conditions. Lastly, I consider potential objections regarding the initial adoption of a Stoic perspective to the issue of the meaning of life.

2. Skeptical Worries

Why offer an account of life's meaning? There may in fact be reasons for not doing so, one metaphysical and one epistemological. With regards to, what I call the *metaphysical worry*, there may not be a meaning of life to discover, so we should not seek an answer. This is a mitigated version of *nihilism*, the view that there is *no* meaning of life.⁵ In response to the metaphysical worry, when we seek a meaning of life, we *at least* have the possibility of discovering meaning. While it may very well be possible that there is no meaning to discover, it seems that our lives become more meaningful when we attempt to discover life's meaning. This result is due in part to Socrates' own thought that when we examine life, we live lives that are worth living (i.e., meaningful).

The second reason for not offering an account of life's meaning I call the *epistemological worry*. This worry can be expressed as: *even if* there is meaning, we can never know what it is—therefore, we should not seek an answer. This

³ See Irvine (2008), Pigliucci (2018), and Robertson (2019).

⁴ I have conducted an extensive search to find any other academic discussions on the relationship between Stoicism and the meaning of life to no avail. I apologize if there are any papers I have overlooked, but I am also happy to incorporate those papers in subsequent discussions on the matter.

⁵ I respond to nihilistic concerns later in this paper.

worry, however, flies in the face of many other human pursuits that have proven valuable for unexpected reasons. For example, in cosmology we can never know how the universe came into existence, in the sense that the universe's origin will no longer be questioned. However, in having pursued the question of how the universe came into existence, presuming there was a time when the universe did not exist, we now have a better understanding of the behavior of light, the development of stars, and our own solar system. Similarly, by attempting to understand the meaning of life, we are able to understand what it means to be human and our relationships. For these reasons, even if we may not be able to know what the meaning of life is, we should still continue to seek an answer.

My initial responses to the metaphysical and epistemological worries might give the impression that I am suggesting we should pursue the question of life's meaning merely for the pragmatic benefits of having done so. But I want to go beyond pragmatism and state that it is not enough to pursue the question of life's meaning simply because doing so gives our lives meaning or that there may be unanticipated benefits. Instead, we should give an account of life's meaning. I acknowledge that we may not be able to produce the final answer of what the meaning of life is or what it means to live meaningfully, such that the question of life's meaning is no longer asked, but some answer is better than no answer. In large part, we should give an account of life's meaning since we orient our lives in accordance with what we take the meaning of life to be. Such an understanding has the capacity to influence and guide all our other pursuits, including professional, personal, and academic. Given the significant impact that an account of the meaning of life can have on how we live, we should give an account, while being open to its susceptibility to revision.

3. Definitional Concerns

Before setting out a criterion for a satisfactory account of life's meaning, we should be clearer as to what is meant by 'meaning of life'. By 'meaning' I mean 'flourishing'. There are, of course, other accounts of 'meaning' in the meaning of life literature, including 'accomplished', 'satisfactory', 'valuable', and 'pleasurable'. While I believe that each of these are important features of a meaningful life, I do not believe they are sufficient for understanding how we should orient our lives, which I believe we do in light of what we take life's meaning to be.

To pursue pleasure as the meaning of life runs the risk of a person constantly seeking pleasures that quickly dissipate (e.g., an orgasm) that result in the person desiring the next pleasurable event. Epicureans and other hedonists are quick to respond to this challenge by ranking pleasures, with intellectual pleasures being the highest form since they are the most withstanding form of pleasure. But even thinking of intellectual pleasures as the measurement by which a person lives meaningfully leaves the individual person looking to some external factor to determine if her life has meaning. Doing so is problematic since it is outside the person's control if those external factors will be available. Yet, it would seem that if a person truly has a meaningful life, it will not be contingent upon something outside the person's life. Furthermore, the person who is not able to pursue and enjoy pleasures should still be capable of having a meaningful life.

Something similar can be said regarding the view that a meaningful life is an accomplished life. The extent to which someone is able to enjoy accomplishments will be due to external factors such as the availability of opportunities that permit accomplishments to occur. A person who is not provided with these opportunities should still be able to develop an account of life's meaningfulness despite being unable to have accomplishments.

It is possible, though, that it is not so much that a person has accomplishments but has the *feeling* that she has lived an accomplished life given the available opportunities—no matter how few they may be. The reliance upon our own feelings or psychological states to determine how meaningful our lives are is problematic. A person with few life experiences will unlikely be able to distinguish between meaningful accomplishments and accomplishments not worthy of notoriety. Furthermore, a person who experiences emotional disturbances is not in the proper position to assess the meaningfulness of her own life. It is an open-ended question, though, as to what sort of accomplishments are meaningful ones; who is not capable of experiencing emotional disturbances (since we are all susceptible to these sort of disturbances); or at which point of our lives we are capable of assessing whether or not our accomplishments have contributed to the meaningfulness of our lives.⁶

These lingering issues give pause to accepting other emotionally based accounts of the meaning of life, including life-satisfaction views. It is not clear as to which aspects of a person's life with which she should be satisfied to have a

⁶ Haybron (2010) offers a similar line of reasoning, indicating that we are very bad at judging how well our own lives are going.

meaningful life. Also, individuals with different emotional capacities will experience different levels of satisfaction. It is unclear, though, how much satisfaction is needed to have meaning. Furthermore, it is not clear at which point of a person's life she should claim to be satisfied with her life to determine she has a meaningful life.

For someone to have a valuable life requires that either the person values her life or engages in a life that is valued. Requiring a person to value her own life befalls similar problems to the other subjective evaluative accounts. The person may not be mature enough or in the right emotional state to value her life in the right way to contribute to her understanding of the meaning of her life. Furthermore, it is likely that at later points of her life she will come to realize that things that gave her life value at earlier points are not as valuable as she had once thought. For these reasons, it is not sufficient to have a person value her life for her to have a meaningful life. On the other hand, in requiring a life to be valued for it to be meaningful begs the question *by whom is the life valued?* If it is the agent herself, then we encounter the aforementioned problems. If it is someone other than the agent, then we run into similar difficulties of looking to external factors to determine if someone's life is meaningful (as in the case of pursuing a pleasurable life as means to having a meaningful life). There may not be someone who is fit to value someone else's life or it is possible that no person is available to provide an evaluation. So, it is not adequate to think of a meaningful life as one that is valued. Therefore, understanding the meaningfulness of life in terms of a valuable life is unlikely to be a viable way for understanding the meaning of life.

While the previous line of reasoning would leave 'flourishing' as the most viable way of understanding 'meaning', there are independent reasons for doing so. First, flourishing is a description of how the person's life is going—regardless of how the person feels about her life. It is counterintuitive that a person may not know if she is living a meaningful life, but it is possible for a child to flourish without having the capacity to know if she is doing so. Yet, others with more experience would be able to recognize the child's flourishing. The child's flourishing, however, is not dependent upon the recognition—it is there such that it can be recognized. Similarly, an adult's flourishing does not depend upon her recognizing that she is flourishing. Such recognition might enhance her abilities to live meaningfully, but the recognition is not the determinant. For this reason, understanding 'meaning' in terms of 'flourishing' avoids many of the problems facing attempts to understand 'meaning' in terms of 'satisfactory',

‘accomplished’, and ‘valuable’.

Second, a person’s capacity to flourish will be constrained by the environmental factors in which she is situated. Yet, a person has the capacity to flourish as well as she can within those constraints—especially when such constraints are beyond her control. This way of thinking of a person’s capacity to flourish ensures that a person does not have to appeal to external factors to live a meaningful life, thereby avoiding the problems facing thinking of ‘meaning’ as ‘pleasure’ and one sense of ‘accomplished’. For these reasons, ‘flourish’ is the preferred way for thinking of ‘meaning’.⁷

With regards to ‘life’ I mean ‘human life’. There are different forms of life and we should not assume that what constitutes the meaningfulness of a human life will be the same things as a dolphin’s, tree’s, or worm’s life. It may turn out that what allows them to have meaningful lives will be determined by the same factors—albeit achieved through different means. My present concerns, however, will focus on what it means for a human to have a meaningful life. In the next section, I propose a criterion of satisfactoriness to use when determining which account of life’s meaning a person ought to adopt.

4. Criterion of Satisfactoriness for an Account of Life’s Meaning

There are four criteria that a satisfactory account of life’s meaning ought to fulfill. It should be *metaphysically non-skeptical*, *epistemologically non-skeptical*, *accessible*, and *empirical*. I treat each of these as being independently necessary for a satisfactory account and argue that they are jointly sufficient (yet, neither one is independently sufficient).

Given the earlier discussion of metaphysical and epistemological worries that comprise skeptical attitudes towards developing a satisfactory account of life’s meaningfulness, a successful account should at minimum assuage us of skeptical concerns. With respect to the metaphysical worry, in allowing for the possibility of there not being a meaning of life we should also take seriously the possibility of there being a meaning of life. But it is not enough to simply state that there is a meaning of life *out there* to be discovered. Instead, an account of the meaning

⁷ This may lead us to believe that a virtue ethics approach is the preferred approach to living a meaningful life. While Stoics certainly adopted much of virtue ethics, more would need to be said in this paper to make the case that a meaningful life is not just a flourishing life, but an ethical life (insofar as it flourishes). While I am inclined to agree, I am not making that claim here. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this matter.

of life should be stipulated as a working hypothesis so that it can be evaluated in terms of its capacity to aid in our abilities to live a meaningful life—presuming that in having an account of the meaning of life we are then able to better understand how to live meaningfully.

In response to the epistemological worry, in having at minimum stipulated an account of life's meaning, we can establish the conditions for what is involved in knowing the account. In particular, we need to at least assume that we *can* know what the account of life's meaning entails so that we can assess if an account is more satisfactory than alternative accounts. The way we should go about assessing the viability of any account of life's meaning will be determined by the last two criteria.

For us to know whether we are appropriately adopting an account of life's meaning, we should have some degree of access to evidence. This accessibility condition is particularly important given that we should know whether we are living meaningfully. Without being aware of how successfully we have implemented the account we do not have the capacity to determine if the account is appropriate or how to live in accordance with the view. If we cannot determine if the account is appropriate, then we have no reason for preferring one account over others. Furthermore, if we do not know if we are living in accordance with the account, then we are unable to properly (re)orient our lives. For these reasons, a satisfactory account of life's meaning will require that we can have access to some level of evidence that warrants the adoption of the view.

The kind of evidence we should have access to ought to be empirically based. The adoption of an account of life's meaning will ultimately alter our experiences of how we live. This does not mean that we should only look to the extent to which we value, have pleasure, feel accomplished, or are satisfied with our lives, although these may be useful indicators. Instead, we should look to the observable effects of having adopted an account of life's meaning. These effects will likely conform to the details of the adopted account, but the effects need to be observable to ensure that it is through the adoption of the account that a person's life is more meaningful for having done so. If the effects are not observable, then the person does not know how to realign how she is living to live in better accordance with the adopted account. Furthermore, the effects can serve as a test as to whether the adopted account should continue to serve as guidance as to how the person should live. For these reasons, the effects need to be observable.

Given the above considerations, we can outline the criterion for a *satisfactory*

account of life's meaning as follows:

An account of life's meaning is satisfactory *if-and-only-if* it is:

1. Metaphysically Non-Skeptical: Assumes that there is a meaning of life *M*.
2. Epistemologically Non-Skeptical: Assumes that we can know *M*.
3. Epistemically Accessible: We can have access to the evidence in support of the belief that *M*.
4. Empirical: The evidence in support of the belief that *M* is observable.

In what follows, I will assess four different accounts of life's meaning in their abilities to satisfy the above criterion to argue that we ought to pursue a Stoic account.⁸

5. Stoicism

In answering the question of what constitutes a meaningful human life, we should be clearer on what it means to be *human*. Humans are social creatures. In addition to the feeling of loneliness being itself a negative experience, those who are left in isolation are susceptible to maladaptive traits. For example, those who are placed in solitary confinement are prone to anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hallucinations, and paranoia.⁹ Thus, indicating that humans require some kind of social interaction to pursue a meaningful life, if not to survive.

The claim that humans are inherently dependent upon the social is reminiscent of Aristotle's (c. 384-322 BCE) own thoughts as to what it means to be human when he writes,

Man is by nature a social animal...Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is self-

⁸ Metz (2013) sets out a similar criterion for determining what 'life's meaning' connotes. My aim, however, is to determine what we should expect from a satisfactory account—not necessarily what the term 'meaning of life' should pick out. While I do discuss in Section 3 what I believe is the appropriate interpretation of 'life's meaning' that is not the central aim of this paper. I do believe, however, that there is some overlap between our two accounts insofar as my account is naturalistic, not reduced to pleasures, and allows for a person to take both a part-life and whole-life view. My concern in this paper, though, is to assess how the Stoics can offer insight to the meaning of life.

⁹ Hagan, Wang, Aimnawung, et al. (2018).

sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god.¹⁰

Not only does Aristotle correctly identify that each person is born into a social context, but that a person needs to participate in that societal context if the person is to live meaningfully as a human.

Aristotle's views had a strong influence on Stoic thinkers. For example, Musonius Rufus suggests that human beings are participants, along with other organisms, in nature, indicating that nature is inherently social and that all living organisms participate in those social relations when he writes, "Human beings and other animals on the earth are involved in the turning and changing of the universe, as are divine beings."¹¹ Seneca suggests that we have an inherent need for others in his claim that "If we take away all interaction, and we renounce the human race, living turned inward only on ourselves, a need for things to do will be the consequence of this kind of isolation."¹² Similarly, Marcus Aurelius observes that humans are situated in relationship with other aspects of nature in claiming that "There are three relations: The one to the body which surrounds thee; the second to the divine cause from which all things come to be; and the third to those who live with thee."¹³ These relations shape how we should live, in suggesting that "We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids...so to work in opposition to one another is against nature, and anger is opposition."¹⁴

Since I believe that the Stoics are on the right track regarding what it means to be human, it is worthwhile to also consider what insights they offer on what it means to live a meaningful human life. The biographer and historian Diogenes Laërtius (180-240 CE) offered some insight on this matter. He maintained that the Stoics divided humans into two classes: *virtuous* and *nonvirtuous*.¹⁵ Those who are virtuous are able to achieve their respective purposes and aims. Those who are nonvirtuous are incapable of fulfilling their respective purposes and aims. For this reason, we can begin seeing how the Stoics would maintain there being a close relationship between living virtuously and having a meaningful life. For Musonius Rufus, this is due to there being "an inborn capacity in the human

¹⁰ Aristotle (2013), I.1253a.

¹¹ Rufus (2011), p. 88.

¹² Seneca (2015) *De Tranquillitate Animi* 3.7

¹³ Marcus Aurelius (2006) *Meditations* VIII, 27

¹⁴ Marcus Aurelius (2006) *Meditations* II, 1

¹⁵ Diogenes Laërtius (1925) *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 101 7.84-131

being's soul for proper living and that the seed of virtue exists in each of us...it is entirely fitting for us to be good.”¹⁶ Seneca maintains that our relationships will allow this “inborn capacity” to manifest itself when he writes,

Here's why we don't just shut ourselves up courageously behind the walls of one city, but set out to have contact with the whole world and proclaim that it belongs to us: it's so that we can give a wider playing field to virtue...You are never so shut out of the greater part of life that the better part of it is not left to you.¹⁷

From the above references, we can begin constructing a Stoic account of life's meaning. The Stoic approach is clearly teleological, since it determines what our purpose is in virtue of being human. If anything, keeping in line with Socrates' claim, our purpose is to live meaningful lives. For the Stoic, living meaningfully involves living virtuously. In doing so, a person is able to flourish (or exhibit *eudaimonia*). Therefore, to live meaningfully is to flourish.

To summarize, what it means to be human is tied to our relations to other humans, our communities, and the cosmos, at large. The better we are at working cooperatively with others, the more meaningful our lives become since it is through the flourishing of these relations that our own lives are better able to flourish. Therefore, the meaning of life is to flourish and the meaning of a human life is to flourish *as* a human being.¹⁸ It is important to note, though, that this does not require subjective well-being, although subjective well-being may be a side effect of flourishing.

In looking at the Stoic account of life's meaning, we get an answer to the metaphysical worry. The meaning of human life will be tied to the kinds of creatures we are—in particular, we understand ourselves as social creatures. Therefore, the meaning of life and how to live meaningfully will be tied to those social relationships. Furthermore, in knowing what kinds of creatures we are, we are able to know what is needed for us to not just merely survive, but to also flourish—therefore allowing us to know what is needed to live meaningfully. If we are living virtuously, then we are able to flourish. Now, there is the difficulty of recognizing if a person is living virtuously if the person is themselves not

¹⁶ Rufus (2011), p. 26.

¹⁷ Seneca (2006) *De Tranquillitate Animi* 4.4

¹⁸ On this account, then, the meaning of a tree's life is to flourish as a tree, and so on.

virtuous. Yet, this is why it is so important that a person surround herself with virtuous individuals so that others can serve as role models. While there is no clear way of knowing with whom we should associate, we can use guess work and be open to revisions in clear cases of relationships not being virtuous to better enhance our chances of flourishing. The extent to which our relationships become more virtuous, or at least less prone to vices, allows us to observe the extent to which we are flourishing by identifying our abilities to further cultivate virtuous relationships. While the Stoic account does not perfectly satisfy all the conditions for a satisfactory account of life's meaning, it fares better than other accounts. In the following sections I will illustrate how, beginning with existentialism.

6. Existentialism

While the Stoic account I offer here focuses primarily on our capacity to enter virtuous relationships, it is fundamentally an *internalist* view since meaning or purpose comes from humans. For this reason, I will discuss existentialism, since it is also an internalist account. One of the more prominent existentialist accounts comes from Sartre (1905-1980). In his 1948 *Existentialism is a Humanism* he provides an account of the meaning of life that is wholly dependent upon the individual person. His account can be summarized by the following passage:

Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity...This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sartre (2007), p. 53.

Sartre's view has some similarities with Stoicism in that he grounds the meaningfulness of life in terms of a human life. Yet, he focuses on the individual human life instead of allowing human relations to play as prominent of a role as they do for the Stoics. For Sartre, it is through the pursuance of projects that are beyond the individual that a person is able to more fully realize herself. Through such realizations, the person is able to determine the meaningfulness of her life.

On the surface, existentialism appears to be a viable theory when considered in terms of the criterion for satisfactoriness. Even though there is no meaning "out there" for the individual to discover, the existentialist allows there to be meaning of life in terms of whatever projects the individual has freely chosen to pursue. In other words, the meaning of life is whatever the person determines to be her meaning. Therefore, the metaphysical worry is met. Given that the meaning of life is self-determined for existentialism, the individual person can then establish the criteria needed to know if she has in fact achieved this sort of meaning. She would then be able to determine the kind of evidence needed to assess if she has fulfilled that meaning, which she would then be able to observe in terms of her own life experience. So, it would seem that the existentialist view is in good standing.

Unfortunately, with allowing the meaning of life to be up to the individual it also makes the meaning of life arbitrary. The first problem with this arbitrariness is that it would allow someone with little life experience to determine what the meaning of life is for herself. A person with little life experience may choose projects that she would not have chosen at a later point in her life. We do not expect children to dictate many things regarding what constitutes a meaningful life, although Sartre does advocate for allowing children to learn through making their own mistakes.²⁰ There are, however, instances in which a parent should intervene when the child engages in behaviors that may be detrimental to her long-term well-being. We also expect some level of paternalistic involvement when anyone engages in behaviors that are at odds with her own best interests, which the person does not always recognize as such (e.g., someone who is not mentally competent to sufficiently express her autonomy). While I agree with Sartre that a person has the freedom to choose for herself, we should also allow others to recognize and assist when some choices may be harmful.

Allowing some level of paternalistic intervention applies also to when

²⁰ Sartre (1943).

someone engages in projects that are not conducive to the person living a meaningful life. Meaning, that not all projects are of equal value when considering which ones will allow a person to live meaningfully—even if they are projects chosen by the individual. On Sartre’s view, and this is the second problem with the arbitrariness of existentialism, is that any project that allows the person to realize herself will be seen as a project that contributes to the meaning of her life. Consider the example of the The Self-Taught Man from Sartre’s *Nausea*, in which The Self-Taught Man realizes his life’s meaning in terms of reading every single book in the library.²¹ On the face of it, it does not seem problematic that someone would like to read books, but in reading the books The Self-Taught Man is not pursuing knowledge or making use of the information—instead, it is the arbitrary task of reading all the books. It is no different than a person who wishes to eat every flavor of *Cheetos* or watch every show on *Netflix*. In accordance with existentialism, these projects are conducive to the person living meaningfully, but I maintain that these projects do not make a person’s life more meaningful since they do not contribute to the person’s flourishing—they are arbitrary accomplishments.

The existentialist could respond by suggesting that it is the individual person’s life and, therefore, up to the person to determine which projects contribute to the meaningfulness of her life—no matter how seemingly arbitrary they may seem.²² The existentialist, however, is mistakenly identifying a person’s life as being solely her own. Given our dependency on others, our lives are intimately tied to our relations (as the Stoics correctly recognize). To ignore the roles that our relationships play in shaping who we are is to ignore what it means to be human. Once we recognize the significance of our relationships, we move away from that view that any project will make a meaningful contribution to our lives. So, while the existentialist account of life’s meaning satisfies the conditions of the criterion for a satisfactory account of life’s meaningfulness, it falls short in allowing any project to count towards a meaningful life since it ignores important features of what it means to be human.

²¹ Sartre (2013).

²² Thanks to Otávio Bueno for this point.

7. Theological Purposiveness

While both Stoicism and existentialism are instances of internalism, there are also externalist views that maintain that the meaning of life will come from some source outside humanity. A candidate source is God. In particular, is the *theological purposive account* that states God has a plan for the universe and that a person's life is meaningful to the degree that one helps God realize His plan.²³

Unlike existentialism, the theological purposive account does not meet all the conditions for the criterion of a satisfactory account of life's meaningfulness. It at least meets the metaphysical worry by positing the existence of God and acknowledging that the meaning of life will be dependent upon God having a plan for our lives. The account, however, becomes problematic when evaluating the epistemological aspects of the criterion.

There are multiple difficulties with coming to know God and what His plan is. In terms of knowing God, there is the challenge of knowing which account of God is correct. Even in assuming that the Judeo-Christian view of God is the correct one, there are difficulties in justifying belief in Him. Hume had laid out some of the challenges of using either miracles or testimonies of religious experiences to justify belief in God's existence.²⁴ There are additional problems of relying upon religious texts. First, many religious texts have been viewed as being apocryphal. Second, there are disputes as to whether or not religious texts should be read literally or metaphorically.

Presuming that these challenges can be resolved, there remains the obstacle of knowing God's plan. Even Leibniz, a theist, maintained that we did not have God's perspective and, therefore, could not know God's plan.²⁵ In terms of knowing God's plan, we run into similar difficulties of knowing if God exists, since we can only appeal to religious texts or testimonies regarding religious experiences to have a sense of what God's plan is. Without knowing what God's plan is, and without having a clearer way of resolving the difficulties of assessing the only available evidence, it is difficult to know if we are correctly living in accordance with that plan.

It is possible that through the adoption of what we take that plan to be that we can assess our lives and the extent to which they are more meaningful through the

²³ Affolter (2007).

²⁴ Hume (1947).

²⁵ Leibniz (1952).

adoption of that plan. We, however, run into the problem of underdetermination in which it is not clear if our lives have become more meaningful due to us fulfilling God's plan, the mere belief that we are fulfilling God's plan, or some other cause. Without resolving the issue of how to know what God's plan is, we are unable to resolve the problem of underdetermination. For these reasons, the theistic purposive account is unable to satisfy the criterion for life's meaning.²⁶

8. Cosmological Nihilism

Other externalist accounts involve looking to the cosmos as a whole for the source of life's meaning. I believe that looking to the cosmos befalls similar problems as the theological purposive account. For this reason, I will not discuss positive cosmological accounts. Instead, I will discuss potential problems of adopting *cosmological nihilism*—the view that a single human being or the entire human species is insignificant, without purpose and unlikely to change in the totality of existence.²⁷

Cosmological nihilism has much in common with existentialism. Both views acknowledge that there is no meaning in life when viewed from the perspective of the cosmos. Existentialism, however, posits that there is meaning insofar as an individual realizes projects that transcend the self. Benatar, however, endorses cosmological nihilism “My view of cosmic meaning is indeed nihilistic. I think that there is no cosmic meaning.”²⁸ This view clearly does not satisfy the criterion for life's meaning. There is no meaning posited, so it not only fails to resolve the metaphysical worry, but instead endorses metaphysical skepticism. For this reason, there is nothing to know. But this is exactly the point of cosmological nihilism. So, the cosmological nihilist would not be concerned with not satisfying the criterion. Given that we use our understanding of the meaningfulness of life to orient our lives, cosmological nihilism is inadequate for understanding how to live.

Benatar acknowledges that we should not be looking for meaning by adopting the cosmological view, since there will not be anything to find. Rather than looking to the cosmos for meaning, we should look at our lives and relationships

²⁶ Metz (2013) also rejects the theological purposive account, but for metaphysical reasons—whereas my argument is focused on epistemological reasons for rejecting the theological purposive account.

²⁷ Crosby (1988), Storey (2011), and Benatar (2017).

²⁸ Benatar (2017), p. 62.

for meaning. He acknowledges that while life is meaningless, as a whole, it has meaning. He maintains,

Many different meanings are possible. One can transcend the self and make a positive mark on the lives of others in myriad ways. These include nurturing and teaching the young, caring for the sick, bringing relief to the suffering, improving society, creating great art or literature, and advancing knowledge.

Whereas the existentialist provides an account as to why these sorts of activities contribute to the meaningfulness of our lives, Benatar does not. He should, though, offer some explanation as to why humans are capable of deriving meaningfulness from their experiences, projects, and relationships where there is not cosmological meaning.

In large part, I believe that this lack of an explanation is due to him not offering an account of what it means to be a human, person, or self. But some account should be given if we are interested in what constitutes the meaning of a human life. Benatar's discussion, however, only focuses on the meaning of life (in general). This is where I believe that existentialism is preferable to Benatar's account, since the existentialist is centrally concerned with the meaning of life as it relates to the subject of experience (i.e., human beings). But, given that the Stoics are more successful in accounting for the significance of human relations, the Stoic account is more viable than the existentialist account. Therefore, the Stoic account is preferable to the cosmological nihilist's in accounting for how we can have human meaning—even if we reject the idea of there being cosmological meaning (which I do not believe we should).

9. Objections and Implications

While I have provided reasons for adopting 'flourishing' instead of other candidate definitions of 'meaning', I have given priority to Stoicism to understand what it means to live a meaningful life. In addition to the ways in which I believe that Stoicism more successfully satisfies the criterion for life's meaningfulness, there may still be concerns with adopting a Stoic framework. In particular, some additional explanation should be given as to why humans are better off when they live and work virtuously in accordance with others. In large part, it is not simply

due to the pragmatic benefits of living and working virtuously with others (e.g., security), but I would go so far as to say that we do flourish when we live virtuously and that it is due to the sorts of creatures that we are that we see this result.

Compare this assessment to other living organisms. For example, a sunflower has particular natural needs to flourish as a sunflower. It requires an appropriate environment in which it has full and bright sun, in addition to well-drained soil. The sunflower will not grow if it does not have these things. Furthermore, the quality of these things will determine the ways in which it grows. The better quality these things are then the more likely the sunflower will flourish. Human beings are similar insofar as in addition to food, shelter, and water, we also need social interactions. The quality of food, shelter, and water will impact our abilities to maintain good health. Furthermore, the quality of our social interactions will impact our capacity to develop and make meaningful contributions to those relations. A way to measure these relationships is in terms of virtue. By entering virtuous relationships, we greatly increase our chances of becoming virtuous. By becoming virtuous ourselves, we further enhance the virtuosity of the relationships. Thereby, enhancing the overall community. Since humans are born into a community, the more virtuous the community is in which they are born, the greater chance the person has in becoming virtuous. Yet, this is a natural feature of us in a similar way to how the environmental factors impact a sunflower's capacity to flourish.

With regards to the meaningfulness of our lives, when adopting this Stoic way of thinking, our lives have meaning and we can understand how to live meaningfully insofar as we pursue a virtuous life. The meaningfulness of our lives, however, will not be tied to us as individuals (as the existentialist would have it). Instead, meaning will be tied to the extent to which our relations can flourish. Furthermore, we should not believe that by looking only at our relations that there is no meaning when viewed from the cosmological perspective. Instead, there is still cosmological meaning in the sense that the meaningfulness of our lives will be tied to the kinds of creatures that we are.²⁹ Therefore, we also have cosmological reasons for adopting the Stoic account of what it means to live a meaningful life.³⁰

²⁹ I am not making a claim about natural kinds.

³⁰ It is at this point of the discussion where my account has some overlap with Wolf (2015). In particular, the conditions for flourishing are objective conditions in a similar way to how the projects

10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out to motivate the pursuance of a Stoic account of the meaningfulness of life. At its core, the argument can be summarized as follows: With regards to the question of what it means to live a meaningful life, we can either adopt an externalist or internalist position. As least some specific variations of two externalist views, the cosmological and theological, are unsatisfactory. When considering some specific variations of two internalist views, existentialism and Stoicism, existentialism is unsatisfactory due to its deemphasis of human relations in shaping the meaningfulness of our lives. Not only does Stoicism adequately fulfill the criterion of satisfactoriness of life's meaningfulness, but it correctly emphasizes the importance of human relations as well as accounting for how we can have meaning in our lives as a result of pursuing various projects that enable us to transcend ourselves in the contexts of our relationships. In large part, this is due to how in pursuing those projects we are further cultivating virtue in both ourselves and our communities. Therefore, we have reasons to further explore, if not accept, a Stoic view of what it means to live a meaningful life.³¹

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that give our lives value do so objectively. Whereas Wolf's account is focused on projects, my account is focused on relationships.

³¹ For Mirai. An initial version of this paper was presented at the Second International Conference of Meaning of Life October 8th, 2019 at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. Thank you to the members of the audience for their helpful feedback. Thanks to John Partridge for providing substantive comments and conversation. Another version of this paper was presented as part of the Distinguished Guest Lecture Series at Yavapai College in Prescott, Arizona January 28th, 2020. Thank you to the participants, especially students, who attended. This paper was greatly improved by the helpful comments provided by an anonymous reviewer and Masahiro Morioka.

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The Relational Account of Meaning in Life A Critique

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Abstract

The relational account by Robert Nozick (1981; 1989) posits meaning as engaged, external connection to an array of value, and it has been widely influential in debates concerning life's meaning. Thaddeus Metz (2001; 2013; 2016) proffers several counterexamples to the view, arguing that it does not best account for what is conceptually important to meaning in life. We evaluate these criticisms, determining that while some objections are less persuasive, others are more compelling, particularly Metz's subjectivist critique which we go on to expand in developing a novel counterexample to the relational view. We conclude with positing another final counterexample—a being who accrues meaning in life solely through internal relations.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the relational theory has been one of the most prominent accounts in the philosophical literature on life's meaning. The basic notion is simple: meaning in life requires that one intensely connects with an array of value beyond oneself. It was first made popular by Robert Nozick in his two works *Philosophical Explanations* (1981) and *Examined Life* (1989); many have subsequently adopted his approach, or at least prominent features of it, as a viable framework for grasping meaning in life (Cooper 2003: 29-30, 132; Bennett-Hunter 2014; Bennett-Hunter 2016: 1277; Benatar 2017: 18, 54).

One of the most notable critics of this view is Thaddeus Metz (2001: 145-147; 2013: 29-31; 2016). In analyzing the relational view, he makes a careful distinction between a *conception* of life's meaning ("a theory of what makes life meaningful") and the *concept* of a meaningful life ("what the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about") (Metz 2001: 138).¹ Metz divides his counterexamples to Nozick's account by what Metz takes to be strong formulations of a relational *conception* of meaning in life and a relational *concept*

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¹ A distinction made well-known by John Rawls (1999: 5).

of meaning in life (2001: 145-146; 2013: 18-21; 28-31). Specifically, he postulates “the idea of connecting with something valuable for its own sake beyond one’s person” for the former notion (Metz 2013: 28) and “the idea of connecting with final goods beyond one’s animal self” for the latter (Metz 2013: 29).

We render differently a relational conception of meaning and a relational concept of it, as will be clear later (the terms “relational account” or “relational theory” encompass both these aspects). However, Metz’s counterexamples will be understood as applicable to our analysis of the relational view since the central elements of intrinsic value as ultimate terminus (for the relational conception of meaning) and external connection (for the relational concept of meaning) are common to both Metz’s and our characterizations. The focus of this paper will be on the aspect of external connection as it functions within Nozick’s account. In other words, we do not dispute that value is needed for meaning. What we question is whether one must connect *externally* to that value in order to gain meaning (this is also the central element that Metz’s counterexamples center on). Thus, even though this paper splits up a relational conception and concept of meaning for purposes of aligning with Metz’s delineation, the distinction will not be important for the rest of the paper. For our critique of the crucial aspect of external connection is a criticism of both the relational concept and conception of meaning—in other words, an objection to the relational account.

We begin with a brief survey of Nozick’s view and go on to consider the merits of Metz’s objections. We then offer two primary challenges to the relational account: first, in comparing rival subjectivist theories, outward connections do not seem to be much of a factor in living a meaningful life, casting doubt on the claim that external relations are necessary for meaning. Second, it seems that an entity which makes purely internal connections is able to obtain meaning, again calling into question the element of outward connection that is vital to the relational theory.

2. Nozick’s Relational Account

As we interpret Nozick according to the concept/conception schema that Metz uses, the concept of meaning in life is inherently relational: “We can understand the question of something’s meaning, roughly, as the question of how it connects up to what is outside it” (Nozick 1981: 601). Again, Nozick writes concerning this concept of meaning, “To seek to give life meaning is to seek to transcend the limits

of one's individual life" (Nozick 1989: 166). In other words, one must connect externally, not internally, in order to live a meaningful life. Admittedly, the internal/external distinction is somewhat vague, yet it seems that enough sense can be made of the idea of something being beyond one's self in order to intelligibly discuss making meaning through external connections.²

However, Nozick's relational account does not stop there. He fleshes out this framework with his conception of what makes life meaningful, namely the idea that meaning in life requires that one strongly connects outside oneself to worth (Nozick 1989: 167-168). Worth is the category he classifies value and meaning under, although he sees value as that which primarily endows meaning, particularly intrinsic value (Nozick 1981: 610-613). The rationale for value's primacy is that if meaning were the only aspect of worth that one could link to in order to acquire meaning, a regress problem would occur that would be difficult to stop (Nozick 1989: 167-168). This is because intrinsic meaning is hard to fathom given meaning's inherently relational nature—there is always another connection that needs to be made in order for meaning to accrue (Nozick 1981: 599). He writes, "We need not look beyond something to find its (intrinsic value), whereas we do have to look beyond a thing to discover its meaning... The regress of meaning is stopped by reaching something with a kind of worth other than meaning—namely, reaching something of value" (Nozick 1989: 167-168).³

Regarding these outward relations, it is not mere connections that matter. They must be strong ones that interact in some important way (e.g. passion, engagement, etc.) with the non-trivial thing connected to (Nozick 1989: 168). And the greater the diversity of value one connects to outside oneself, the more meaning one accrues: "This meaning will depend upon the array of external or wider values connected with it and upon the nature of the connections, their strength, intensity, closeness... The meaning of a life is its place in a wider context of value" (Nozick 1981: 611). Thus, in summary of Nozick's conception of a meaningful life: in order to live such a life, one must substantively link beyond oneself to worth—particularly, a wider context of value where intrinsic value ultimately grounds one's transcendent relations toward meaning.

One question that arises under this framework is whether one must connect to

² For instance, other philosophical debates such as epistemic internalism/externalism or personal autonomy find ways of having sensible discussion centering on what is internal or external to one's self despite the oftentimes unclear nature as to what counts as internal or external to the self.

³ Nozick also considers the notion of a deity as a meaning-conferring destination for linkages; ultimately, he thinks this schema a coherent but insufficiently plausible idea (Nozick 1981: 609).

intrinsic value in order to gain meaning, or whether one can link to instrumental value or even just another meaningful, non-intrinsically valuable entity in order to gain meaning. Certainly, Nozick envisions that chains of meaning must eventually end up with intrinsic value, otherwise the regress never stops. However, he still adheres to a traditional intrinsic/instrumental framework of value (along with some novel categories he stipulates) (Nozick 1981: 312-313). Given this retention, perhaps gaining meaning through instrumental value is also what he has in mind, such as when he writes, “Meaning is a connection with an external value, but this meaning need not involve any connection with an infinite value; we may well aspire to that, but to fall short is not to be bereft of meaning. There are many numbers between zero and infinity” (Nozick 1981: 610-611).

Or consider something that is non-intrinsically valuable yet meaningful. One prime candidate of this sort is chess, about which Nozick states, “An example of value without importance is chess...By connecting up with larger themes of combat, games might be said to have meaning also...But the game is not, I think, important. It does not have any impact beyond itself, even though it is an activity that can dominate someone’s life” (Nozick 1989: 170-171). Nozick considers chess to be somewhat meaningful because it connects to themes of combat. Additionally, it is arguable that he sees chess as non-intrinsically valuable as well, since he describes it as lacking importance, “any impact beyond itself,” and something that fails to deepen the lives of those who participate in it (Nozick 1989: 171)—logically consistent yet hardly fitting descriptions for something which is supposed to possess the highest sort of value.⁴ Given that one seems able to gain meaning by connecting to something meaningful since meaning is a variety of worth (it just can’t be meaning *all the way down*), it is plausible to think that meaning can be gained also by linking to something meaningful without intrinsic value. Thus, although intrinsic value is the ultimate foundation for meaning because it is the final terminus for meaningful connections, it seems that on the relational theory, some meaning can be gained via linkages to non-intrinsically valuable entities.

⁴ Not to mention chess’s arguably low degree of organic unity which depends on “the degree of diversity and the degree of unity to which that diversity is brought” (and for Nozick, something possesses intrinsic value “to the degree that is organically unified”) (Nozick 1989: 164).

3. Metz's Objections—Possible Rebuttals

Metz objects to the relational view with a flurry of counterexamples regarding activities that grant one meaning in life but fail to involve any external connection:

Consider that the following could in principle make one's life somewhat more meaningful: publicly standing by what one reflectively believes to be right, exhibiting courage and performing a difficult act because it is right, being true to oneself, overcoming addiction, not letting oneself be bossed around, discovering new particles and confirming the existence of certain laws of nature. Since integrity, virtue, authenticity, autonomy, self-respect, and knowledge are internal to a person, or at least do not essentially involve a relationship to an external final good, and since they are *prima facie* candidates for a meaningful life, the concept of a meaningful life cannot just be that of an existence that has 'a connection with an external value' (Metz 2013: 29).

However, it seems that these sorts of examples could plausibly be construed as giving meaning because of a linkage to an outward good even if they do not necessarily involve an external connection. For example, in the case of scientific discoveries, they could be meaningful because they are explanations that connect with what the world is really like, that is, they accurately represent the "facts" of the physical world (Kim 1988: 225). Nozick's own tracking theory of knowledge is similar to this picture: "Knowledge is a particular way of being connected to the world, having a specific real factual connection to the world: tracking it" (Nozick 1981: 178). Additionally, externally connecting to facts is the sort of thing that confers meaning on Nozick's view. He writes, "For a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself...Tracking, *either of facts* or of value, is a mode of being so connected, as is fitting an external purpose" (emphasis mine) (Nozick 1981: 594-595).

Or in the case of possessing virtues, agents may live meaningful lives *qua* virtuous because they link up to an objective moral reality that counts virtues like justice and courage as objective goods. For instance, if one were to do as Nozick does and seriously consider how a Platonic account might interact with the relational view, then one could say that to be virtuous is to participate in the Form of the Good (Nozick 1981: 595). This is the form that for Plato was the ultimate

grounding of truth and virtue which gave the other forms, such as justice, their goodness (Santas 1989: 144). Being virtuous through connecting oneself to the Form of the Good would presumably be an external link given that it is an entity we should distinguish “from everything else” (*Republic* VII.534b), is “independent of any desires, attitudes, or interest a sentient being may take in it” (Santas 1985: 239), and described as something whose “remoteness...is a metaphorical version of the thesis that value is not in the world...” (McDowell 1979: 347).

In other words, under the present realist analysis, what makes actions meaningful like acquiring scientific knowledge or living virtuously is that the agent engages with something outside himself—in this instance, facts of the world and objective values, respectively. And we do not think this is an implausible view. In fact, it seems that one of the main motivations for holding a realism about any given X (realism conceived of as linking to the “really real”) is that such a stance provides a kind of significance and motivation to the pursuit of X that could be characterized as giving meaning to it.⁵ Thus, the relational notion of connecting to something else that has value seems flexible enough to adequately characterize many of Metz’s counterexamples as meaningful through external linkage.

Metz does offer more difficult counterexamples against the relational account which are harder to construe as making external connection in producing meaning. These are supernaturalist accounts where “a person’s life is meaningful insofar as she honours her soul or realizes what she essentially is *qua* spiritual substance endowed with a freedom independent of the laws of nature” (Metz 2013: 29). Since on these ultra-mundane frameworks a person’s soul seems very much internal to individuals and engagement solely with the soul seems conceptually capable of making life meaningful, such cases are more challenging for the relational theory to explain.

We think these are better counterexamples. However, in giving the relational view a run for its money, it still might plausibly account for the dynamics of meaning in instances of honoring one’s soul or realizing one’s spiritual substance.

⁵ For an example of the phenomenon I am describing here, see Michele Moody-Adams’s criticism of Richard Rorty’s claim that the pursuit of justice needs no referent outside our own desires: “Could the student or the freedom rider engage in these activities [for justice], if they accepted Rorty’s view? Rorty wants to say they could and that all you need is solidarity, I want to say that that’s just nonsense...I think that you need the idea that at some point human moral inquiry could be progressing closer and closer to the grasp of an objective truth. Could be, but not necessarily is. You need that aspiration, you need that hope in order to be able to carry out the activity” (Moody-Adams 1998: 131).

To start, one might take Metz’s notion of meaning gained through realizing one’s higher nature as a form of self-knowledge, that is inquiring into the self (i.e. knowing the self’s nature)—this can be conceived of as “self-awareness [which] yields a grasp of the material or non-material nature of the self” (Gertler 2020). This sort of self-knowledge would involve propositions as its object, namely propositions concerning the true nature of the self.

Thus, in the case of realizing one’s ensouled nature, let *p* be the proposition that one is a soul with freedom independent of the laws of nature and let *q* be someone who is a soul endowed with a freedom independent of the laws of nature. Thus, if *q* gains meaning through realizing *p*, *q* gains propositional knowledge of *p*. But propositional knowledge stands in a relation to the knower; indeed, the idea of a relation holding between knower and proposition is typically seen as a basic feature of attributions of propositional knowledge (Blaauw and Pritchard 2005: 119; Hornsby 2005).⁶ Moreover, the connection between *p* and *q* can be credibly construed as an external relationship. A soul is not typically thought of as composed of propositions, particularly under substance dualism (Moreland 1987) or the Platonic doctrine of the soul as a metaphysically simple entity (van Inwagen 2002: 171; *Phaedo* 78b-80e) (i.e. propositions are not substances nor are metaphysical simples composed of propositional parts).⁷ In other words, under the framework at play, propositions are external to souls, even if the latter incorporates the former, such as with a mind intaking propositional content. Alternatively, under a traditional knowledge/reality divide, propositions, as contents of statements, are representations while souls are things to be represented—they are distinct things (Kim 1988: 225).

Accordingly, it seems plausible to say that *p* is external to *q*, and so when *q* accrues meaning via *p*, *q* does so by making an external connection outside *q*. To be clear, we do not necessarily hold the assumptions and commitments put forth

⁶ For a (somewhat) dissenting perspective, see Fodor (1978), for whom propositional attitudes are relational, but to say that “propositional attitudes are relations to propositions” is unclear since this relation must be mediated by internal representation (see especially p. 520).

⁷ One might respond by saying that propositions may somehow be located within oneself so that when one realizes one’s spiritual substance, one is internally connecting. However, the notion of internality and externality we are using in this instance centers not around location but composition. A pacemaker may be internal to the body but is compositionally external to it, based on the usual conception of composition that a thing’s component parts must be of the same category of the thing which they compose (Lowe 2002: 236). However, if one makes a case for how propositions are in the same ontological category as souls or that the former can compose the latter, then Metz’s supernaturalist counterexamples would gain persuasiveness.

here, such as the claim that propositions must be external to souls. Instead, what we offer is a possible framework through which the relational theory could rebut the soul-based accounts of meaning in life that Metz suggests are ways of gaining meaning without going outside oneself. To summarize, the counterargument to Metz is the following:

1. If q acquires meaning via p, then q connects to p.
2. Propositions (such as p) are not internal to souls (such as q).
3. Thus, if q acquires meaning via p, then q connects externally to p.

4. Metz's Objections—Expanding on the Counterexamples

Having laid out some disagreements and possible replies to several of Metz's counterexamples, we do think that other objections he presents to the relational account are much stronger. For example, he writes, "Conceiving of meaning as merely a function of connection with something external is not sufficient to capture the evaluative dimension of meaning, and, more generally, does not express anything fairly exclusive to meaning in life" (Metz 2013: 28). It is this last bit about the deficient generality of the relational theory that we find compelling. If meaning in life just is that phenomenon which results when one connects to value, it is unclear what work the relational theory of meaning is doing. Value talk (and other variations) seem able to do all the conceptual work that relational meaning is supposed to perform. In discussing the good life, if one speaks of connecting to value and another speaks of connecting to value which is also accompanied by meaning, the latter notion does not seem to add any salient dimension to the conversation—nothing seems to be lost by dropping talk of meaning.

In other words, making meaning in life as generic as connecting to value makes meaning superfluous. Other concepts can easily fulfill the light theoretical responsibilities that meaning is supposed to handle. For example, consider Stephen Darwall's discussion of human welfare, where in the spirit of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, he claims "that a person's welfare is enhanced, her life is made better for her, through active engagement with and appreciation of values whose worth transcends their capacity to benefit (extrinsically or intrinsically)" (Darwall 2002: 76). He goes on to say that "the most beneficial human life consists of activities involving the appreciation of worth and merit" (Darwall 2002: 80). Pleasures such

as musical performance or parenting are important to our welfare because “through them, we are connecting with things that matter. The benefit comes through the appreciation of agent-neutral values—worth and merit—with which these activities connect us” (Darwall 2002: 95).

It is hard to ignore the fact that Darwall’s notion of welfare is almost identical to Nozick’s relational theory of meaning. Both center on non-trivially connecting with things of value (and most of Darwall’s examples of welfare-endowing connections can be seen as external linkages). But if the idea of welfare (or *eudaimonia* as Darwall likens welfare to) can perform the same type of theoretical work in pursuing the good life that meaning claims for itself, then there seems to be little philosophical room left for the relational notion of meaning in life as engaged, external connection to a wider context of value. It is this weakness that we take to be the central merit of Metz’s objection that the relational account “does not express anything fairly exclusive to meaning in life” (Metz 2013: 28). Introducing concepts in value theory with non-unique capabilities are apt to be redundancies of limited use in theorizing the good life.

Metz’s more central criticism against the relational theory is its inability to account for prominent subjectivist conceptions of meaning in life, such as the one proposed by Richard Taylor where what matters for a meaningful life is the satisfaction of one’s desires (Taylor 1970). Using the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus who is condemned by the gods to roll a stone up a hill *ad infinitum*, Taylor says that if the gods were to inject in Sisyphus the voracious desire to roll stones up hills, then Sisyphus’ life would have meaning because he would be doing exactly what he wants to do with his life. On Taylor’s view, the meaning of life is to do whatever it is that we have a deep and abiding interest to fulfill. Metz says that Taylor’s desire-satisfaction subjectivism has been quite influential and extensively discussed, “probably the most widely reprinted and read discussion of the meaning of life in the past 40 years” (Metz 2013: 31). Because of this, the weakness of the relational view is that its concept of meaning simply must deny that Taylor’s view even counts as a theory of meaning in life since on his desire-satisfaction framework, agents accrue meaning without connecting with anything beyond themselves. Metz concludes that it “is difficult to rest content with an analysis that entails that the many who consider Taylor’s theory to be about meaning are conceptually confused” (Metz 2013: 31).

Although we do not hold this specific criticism that Metz makes, we do agree with his broader critique that Taylor’s subjectivism poses a problem for the

relational view since desire-satisfaction illuminates how external connection does not quite capture the definitive features of meaning in life. Our novel version of the objection is simple. Imagine that the gods rescind their punishment and instead implant in Sisyphus the deep desire to simply do nothing, from which he will experience immense pleasure (or happiness). Consequently, Sisyphus lies down unconscious for some time at the top of the mountain and experiences great pleasure and satisfaction from his total inaction. In other words, he connects to nothing external in his blissful idleness (call this Sisyphus 1). Now consider Nozick's experience machine where one can plug into a contraption to simulate any assortment of desirable and pleasurable events for as long as one wants (Nozick 1974: 42-45). This would be connecting with something valuable outside oneself, since the machine is external to the individual. And this is not just any type of value but plausibly intrinsic or final value, as pleasure is widely categorized as such among hedonists and non-hedonists alike (Goldstein 1989: 273; Hurka 2001; Feldman 2004: 31; Goetz 2012: 14; Metz 2013: 29).⁸ Furthermore, imagine that in this alternate world, Sisyphus 2 climbs down from the mountain and temporarily hooks up to the experience machine, encountering the same magnitude of pleasurable/happy fulfillment he experiences in the case of desire-satisfaction from complete idleness.

Before moving to the substance of the objection, it is worth pointing out that Nozick considers a lifetime committed to the experience machine as unmeaningful, but not because the machine lacks value. He does think that there is value to the machine, if it is used limitedly.⁹ He writes the following:

Notice that we have not said one should never plug in to such a machine, even temporarily. It might teach you things, or transform you in a way beneficial for your actual life later. It also might give you pleasures that

⁸ There is a distinction sometimes made between something having *intrinsic* value (value in itself) and *final* value (value for its own sake), with the former specifying the location or source of the value, while the latter refers to the object's value as an end (Korsgaard 1983: 170). It seems that the concept of final value is the one that philosophers have generally found more important (Rønnow-Rasmussen 2015: 34), although some deem "intrinsic value" an appropriate reference to final value's denotation (Kagan 1998: 293; Zimmerman and Bradley 2019). In this paper, the terms "intrinsic value" and "final value" refer to Nozick's idea of intrinsic value as the value something "has in itself apart from or independently of whatever it leads to or its further consequences" (Nozick 1981: 311).

⁹ Whether he thinks the machine has intrinsic value is unclear since that would depend on its organic unity, Nozick's measure of intrinsic value. A point in favor of its possessing intrinsic value, however, would be *qua* source of pleasure, arguably an intrinsic good.

would be quite acceptable in limited doses. This is all quite different from spending the rest of your life on the machine; the internal contents of *that* life would be unconnected to actuality” (Nozick 1989: 108).

Herein lies the primary reason why Nozick rejects a lifetime hooked to the machine. Such an act privileges the value of pleasure in a way that makes no room for other values, most importantly, connecting to reality. He writes, “I am saying that the connection to actuality is important whether or not we desire it—that is *why* we desire it—and the experience machine is inadequate because it doesn’t give us *that*” (Nozick 1989: 107). In other words, a lifetime in the machine fails to connect to a “wider context of value,” one of the key aspects of a meaningful life on the relational view (Nozick 1981: 611). He goes on to say concerning a life solely constituted by pleasure and happiness, like the one the experience machine provides, that a “life cannot just be happy while having nothing else valuable in it” (Nozick 1989: 113).¹⁰ Although “[o]f course we wish people to have many such moments and days of happiness,” Nozick writes, “it is not clear that we want those moments constantly or want our lives to consist wholly and only of them” (Nozick 1989: 117). While pleasure is valuable, a life totally consumed by it is limited in meaning because such an existence is constrained regarding the diversity of value it can link with.

Hence, on Nozick’s view, the experience machine is valuable in the sense that pleasure is a value that can appropriately be part of a meaningful life as long as other values (like linking to reality) are present. With this background, our contention is that the two scenarios of our Sisyphus counterexample indicate that connecting to value outside oneself is not what is fundamental for meaning in life. Under the relational theory, Sisyphus 2 accrues more meaning in life than Sisyphus 1 since the latter experiences value (pleasure) without external linkage while Sisyphus 2 connects to a machine outside himself in experiencing the value of pleasure. In fact, Sisyphus 1 gains no meaning whatsoever since no external connection with value is made. But are these implications plausible? Is the mere fact of external connection the decisive difference in the meaningfulness of the two lives? We think that the basic intuition here is that Sisyphus 1 and Sisyphus 2 are more or less equivalent in overall meaningfulness (whether the degree is high or low). The mere fact that Sisyphus 2 involves an external relation in

¹⁰ Nozick doesn’t carefully distinguish between pleasure and happiness but seems to classify pleasure as a type of happiness (Nozick 1989: 108).

experiencing pleasure while Sisyphus 1 encounters the same sort of desire satisfaction absent linkage outside himself does not seem to be a decisive (or even relevant) factor in evaluating the meaningfulness of the two Sisyphuses. And if this is so, then external connection to value is not what is definitive for meaning in life, contra the relational account.

Another way to put forward the basic intuition that undergirds our objection is this: many would consider meaning in life to be a highly desirable good. Now imagine if people were told that they must spend the rest of their lives either as Sisyphus 1 (pleasure without transcendent connection) or Sisyphus 2 (pleasure via the experience machine). Thus, if meaning is a great good and conceptually relational, then would not people have strong reason to prefer the experience machine over idle pleasure lacking external connection if the degree of pleasure is the same in both cases? It seems to us that people would not have an overwhelming preference for the experience machine option since it exhibits no greater virtue over the alternative, particularly in the dimension of meaning. Of course, there might be reason not to prefer either option but given a forced choice between the two, the fact that one scenario includes external connection and the other does not seems insufficient as an important, rational consideration to persuade either way. So if meaning in life is conceptually relational and generally considered a great good, but it is not consistently favored, then this gives some reason to believe that perhaps a relational understanding of meaning is not quite capturing what is necessary for it. Hence, we conclude that meaning as external connection to value does not adequately explain what is important for meaning in life.

5. Meaning via Internal Connections: A Triune God

In this section and the next, we attempt to provide a case of a life that is meaningful through solely internal connections, thus providing a counterexample to the relational view's claim that for "a life to have meaning, it must connect with other things, with some things or values beyond itself" (Nozick 1981: 594).¹¹ Our

¹¹ Another deity-involved counterexample which we do not explore is positing that God just "glows meaning," exactly the kind of explanation about which Nozick incredulously asks, "How in the world (or out of it) can there be something whose nature contains meaning, something which just glows meaning?" (1981: 593). Perhaps God has the Form of Meaning in the divine mind (i.e. meaning as an abstract object constituted by God's thought) (Welty 2014: 81) so that God simply emanates meaning as part of the divine nature, making the meaning of God's life an entirely non-external affair. Or maybe

first example is the Christian Trinity. Of course, many do not think that contemporary models of the Trinity are logically coherent or consistent with biblical and creedal formulations (Winter 2013; Tuggy 2016). However, our counterexample does not assume any one model of the Trinity nor its general coherence; rather, it supposes that the basic structure of the Trinity is coherent enough to speak of as one entity, formed by three persons, and which gains meaning through solely connecting with itself.¹²

Before getting into the concept of the Trinity, we wish to make a few prefatory points. First, although we do not delve into what constitutes a person, we think that the three individuals of the Trinity fulfill most mainstream criteria for personhood. These include being “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself” (Locke 1689/2017: 115), having a capacity for a “first-person perspective” (Baker 2000: 20), and possessing a will that is able to form “second-order desires” (i.e. desires for desires) (Frankfurt 1971: 6-7). Second, despite the plurality of persons, we deem it coherent to conceive of a triune deity as a single being that can be characterized as having a unitary life. One way to think of this notion is through the mythological dog Cerberus who has three heads but is one biological organism (this is the illustration that William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland offer in explicating their “Trinity monotheism” model of the Christian God) (2017: 592). Similarly, one can speak of the Trinity having three persons but existing as one, united being, since the Godhead is a single “divine organism.” The members of the Trinity can also be thought of as a single life in being “necessarily united in their purposes and in their actions towards the world,” (Hasker 2013: 257) since the unity of one’s mind and intentions is often seen as central to living one life as opposed to several.¹³ In these ways, we deem it sensible to discuss the notion of meaning in the Trinity’s life, while also speaking of the relations among the persons as

God just creates meaning, like how God creates the world (although this particular case might run into the “bootstrapping objection” found in discussions of divine aseity where God might already need to possess a property, like meaningfulness, in order to create it) (Craig 2016: 60-61). At any rate, these sorts of scenarios at least seem conceptually possible and (mostly) unproblematic. There seems to be no obvious reason for a theist to reject them. However, we will not further pursue such an easy line of objection.

¹² This position is consistent with speaking of particular aspects of meaning in the life of each individual person of the Trinity as well.

¹³ This is why those who display very different purposes and conduct in one setting as opposed to another are called “two-faced” (if they act with hypocrisy) or accused of living a “double life” (if certain elements of secrecy are involved).

“internal connections” (i.e. internal to the one life of the triune God).¹⁴

The concept of the Trinity has historically been that there is one God made of three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. The starting point for this idea comes from various Christian creeds, such as the Athanasian Creed (c. A.D. 500) which states, “Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being. Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.” Accordingly, Christian philosophers are generally united on this essential framework of the Trinity. For example, Michael Murray and Michael Rea state that “[f]rom the beginning, Christians have affirmed the claim that there is one God, and three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each of whom is God” (Murray and Rea 2016).¹⁵ Similarly, William Hasker writes, “Yet the question, ‘One what?’ also needs to be answered, if we are to have a satisfying answer to the metaphysical problem of the divine three-in-oneness. To be sure, the question can easily be answered, ‘One God,’ and all trinitarians will agree to that” (Hasker 2013: 50). In other words, the Trinity is three persons that integrate into one entity with a single existence, whether that three in one is conceived of as three properties of divine personhood with the same divine substance (Rea 2009: 419), three centers of self-consciousness with one soul (Craig and Moreland 2017: 593), or three divine individuals who jointly establish a collective, single source of the being of all else (Swinburne 1994: 180). For our purposes, it does not matter what precisely explains this three-in-oneness. All we need to establish is that the Trinity, at the very least, is one completely unified being that “is not a single person, but the closest possible union and communion of the three divine persons” (Hasker 2013: 258).

Our claim is for the conceptual possibility of a triune God possessing a meaningful life via purely internal connections, without transcending outside Godself.¹⁶ To begin, imagine that the members of the Trinity have always

¹⁴ As in the previously discussed case of propositions being external to souls in the sense of being compositionally external, the three persons of the Trinity are internally situated because they compose the Godhead. To reiterate, a simple notion of composition is that for x to compose y , x and y must be in the same ontological category. The three persons of the Trinity fulfill this criterion because they are of the same divine substance as the Trinity (at least according to most models of the Christian God). Hence, it is plausible to think that the act of one person of the Trinity relating to another, while external to the two, is internal to the one life of the Trinity. Here, the “one life” of the Trinity is understood by extending the notion of self to include multiple persons within a single being.

¹⁵ For a dissenting view of the Trinity’s theological history, see Tuggy (2016).

¹⁶ Although there is controversy over differentiating what is internal or external to God, particularly concerning abstract objects, we think that the examples we have chosen in this section of God’s meaningful life through solely internal connections are clearly divine aspects and relations internal to

intensely loved each other. In fact, this is an argument often given for a plurality of persons within the Godhead (Swinburne 1994: 190-191; Swinburne 2008: 28-38; Craig and Moreland 2017: 593). It is claimed that since God is a perfect being, God must be essentially loving since love is a necessary attribute of a morally perfect being. Hence, there must be several divine persons for God to ceaselessly express this attribute of love. So if the Trinity has been in thoroughly loving relationships within the Godhead's three persons since eternity past, it seems that a triune God's enduring interactions of complete love is a viable possibility for at least a somewhat meaningful life. And this three-person love within the one God would be through solely internal connections, as prior to any creational act, God would be existing alone in all reality, with each member of the Trinity bestowing great love upon the other. Thus, we think that the notion of a triune God exclusively connecting internally through ceaselessly loving Godself through inter-relations of love within the Trinity is a "*prima facie* candidate" for a meaningful life (Metz 2013: 29). Accordingly, the relational account's requirement that connections beyond oneself are needed for meaning seems inadequate for capturing what is at the heart of having a meaningful life.

But perhaps one may be skeptical that the case of the Trinity is a strong counterexample to Nozick by virtue of the plurality of persons present in the scenario. One might say that the "one life" of the triune God accrues meaning externally because the divine persons obtain meaning outside themselves. While we have tried to emphasize that it is from the perspective of the one *Godhead* that the connections to value are internal (not from the perspective of any individual divine person, where linkages will be external), we present another variety of meaning via internality for those yet unpersuaded.

6. Meaning via Internal Connections: An Aristotelian God

Imagine that instead of the Trinity, Aristotle's "most good" deity is the one who reigns supreme (*Metaphysics* 1072b30). For Aristotle, this is the sort of individual who does nothing but contemplate Godself since the divine is the most excellent thing to direct one's thoughts, and to contemplate anything else would be to engage in a less-than-perfect activity (Steenberghen 1974: 557; Craig 1980: 35). In fact, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle cites God's rational activity as

God (e.g. interrelations among the members of the Trinity), and so we hope to sidestep the aforementioned debate (Craig 2016: 81-82).

the standard for human flourishing: “Therefore the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness” (X.1178b21-24). Furthermore, he says concerning this act of divine contemplation that “it must be itself that thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking” (*Metaphysics* XII.1074b33-34).

It is of course difficult to know exactly what Aristotle speaks of with the phrase “thinking on thinking,” but suppose that God’s contemplation here is utterly simple, non-relational, and unconnected to propositional knowledge (Beere 2010: 27). In this sort of scenario, we deem an Aristotelian God as still being able to have a meaningful life solely through this type of contemplative internal connection. Suppose the deity’s eternal self-contemplation is the most excellent expression of reason imaginable while also being highly pleasurable. It seems that this type of divine life is not incapable of meaning, as it would fulfill many traditional conceptions of meaning in life which stipulate activities such as intense engagement with rationality or experiencing great pleasure as sufficient for meaning. At any rate, what we hope to have shown is that it is difficult to characterize an Aristotelian God’s life as deficient in meaning simply because the deity’s connections to value are internal instead of external. If the difficulty looms large enough, then our counterexample should persuade those partial to the relational theory to reconsider whether external linkage to value is necessary for meaning in life.

7. Conclusion

In summary, we think that although the relational account is more resistant to some of Metz’s counterexamples, it is less resilient against others and the variations of them that we have developed in this paper, particularly our subjectivist example of Sisyphus 1 and 2. It also seems that life could be meaningful through solely internal relations, such as a triune God’s existence of love only among the persons of one Godhead living a single life or an Aristotelian deity’s perpetually exercising rational self-contemplation. As said at the outset, it is the idea of external connection being needed for meaning that this paper disputes. Now, all this does not mean that the relational theory has nothing to offer regarding how to best grasp meaning in life. For instance, one could take Metz’s

suggestion that perhaps “meaning can be essentially relational without being exhaustively relational” (Metz 2016: 1252). In other words, the relational theory could explain how meaning increases through one’s reaching beyond oneself while not limiting all avenues of meaning to external connections. This is quite possible, especially when considering the fact that most paradigmatic examples of meaning-making, like family relationships or aiding the poor, involve relating to entities beyond oneself. What looks less attractive, though, is the idea that transcendence beyond oneself toward a wider context of value is all there is to meaning in life. In our opinion, there must be more to life than that.

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Living *through* Nature

Capturing Interdependence and Impermanence in the Life Framework of Values

Layna Droz*

Abstract

To collaborate across cultures to efficiently tackle global environmental problems, we need to understand better the various ways in which individuals and groups value nature through their own situated worldviews. The Life Framework of Values aims at mapping the global diversity of values under the four dimensions of living *from*, *with*, *in* and *as* nature. Yet, it still faces difficulties to capture the interdependent and ever-changing aspects of the relation of human life to nature. This paper proposes a fifth dimension: living *through* nature. We are living *through* the world, continuously interacting with our milieu, shaping it and being shaped by it. Flows keep crossing the porous and dynamic borders of our bodies and communities. Finally, the example of Dōgen's philosophy of mutual interdependence and impermanence is presented to illustrate the dimension of *living through* the world.

Keywords: *Milieu; Environmental Ethics; Dōgen; Impermanence; Japanese Philosophy; Buddhism; flow; ecosystem services.*

1. Introduction

The reality of environmental changes and the threat that these changes pose to human ways of life cannot be denied.¹ In particular, climate change, desertification and biodiversity loss are “scientific facts” that enjoy wide consensus among the world scientific community. As environmental issues are global, questions such as “what meanings we give to life”, “what we want to sustain” and “what matters to us in nature” must be asked at the global level if we want to build solutions together. These questions of meaning in life lie at the crossroad of disciplines as diverse as philosophy of meaning in life,

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environmental ethics, ecology and natural sciences. Crucially, they are also tied to norms and values and face a high diversity of worldviews. In this diverse global context, the distinction between scientific facts and situated value judgments is the key to prevent the imposition of one dominant worldview on others.

Umbrella terms such as “the world” and “nature” attempt to cover the bundle of facts, phenomena and states of affairs that *are* and that surround us. Yet, there is an irreducible gap between this neutral objective reality and what we can perceive and access from our limited standpoint. To the best of our capacity and knowledge, we translate what we perceive into scientific facts using conventions that can be scientific, logic, linguistic, or else. These facts are the theories that can approximate the best what we can access of the reality according to the current scientific consensus. Filtered by authors and editors’ decision-making, they can be recorded in reports and journals. This filter makes the difference between what we *can* say and express, and what we actually say and. Far from being neutral, actions and speech –scientific or not– are strongly influenced by norms, values and meanings, and they are determined by the decision-making processes of individual phenomenological agents.

Two remarks must be made. First, values require valuers. Meanings require thinkers. They are not facts existing outside of our thoughts, but beliefs that depend on our experience. Second, perceivers, thinkers and believers are *always* individuals. Yet meanings and beliefs are built through interactions with other people. We understand things in the world and value them within the frame of a particular worldview that we learn and appropriate in the process of growing up and living together with others in a specific sociocultural context. Worldviews are not neutral scientific facts; they are the frame and lenses through which one perceives and acts. They are sets of meanings, values, beliefs and habits that are partially invisible to their beholders, but crucially influence their decision-making and ways of life. Particular worldviews are held by individuals, often shared within groups and dominate in particular milieus, shaping how people live, think and act. Ultimately, we are always irreducibly trapped in our specific standpoint and we frame our perception and reality in a particular sociocultural worldview. Of course, we can minimize the weight of the subjective and cultural lenses by using tools and seeking towards objectivity; that is the core of the scientific enterprise. But when we understand, express and do something, we can never totally erase our standpoint, as it is inseparable from the fact of consciousness and thinking. Specifically, *we cannot* perceive, understand and act in the world

without being human.

This paper explores some attempts to grasp the diversity of ways life and nature are valued, inscribed in different worldviews. First, the Life Framework of Values is presented. This framework recently gains traction among researchers and policy-makers aiming at capturing the various ways in which nature matters to human beings. Second, I suggest that the four axes of the framework (*living from, with, in, as* nature) do not encapsulate the dynamicity and temporality of the relation itself, and propose to add a fifth dimension, namely, *living through* nature. Finally, I illustrate the dimension of *living through* nature by shortly describing Dōgen's philosophy of impermanence and interdependence of things.

2. Life Framework of Values

International environmental law-makers, environmental non-governmental organizations and the scientific community have attempted to capture the diversity of ways in which nature matters to different human societies (e.g. IPBES 2016, IPBES 2019, Jamieson 2008, James 2019). The need for international collaboration at the global level to efficiently address global environmental issues confronts us with the challenge exposed previously, namely, that how individuals and groups value the world largely depends on their worldviews, these lenses that are most of the time invisible to their beholders. The idea of ecosystem services was arguably the most successful attempts to classify and to shed light on the various ways in which human beings benefits from the environment (Jax et al., 2013). Yet, the idea of ecosystem services has suffered from its popularity among economists and is criticized for pushing forward a monetary valuation of the environment at the expense of other forms of valuation, thus supporting the commodification of nature. As a result of these criticisms, the idea of “nature's contributions to people” was introduced, particularly popular among social sciences and humanities, because it was seen as encompassing non-monetary ways of valuing nature, including indigenous perspectives on the relation between human beings and their environment. Notably, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) used the concept of nature's contributions to people in its Global Assessment of Biodiversity.

Recently, building on this conceptual tendency to include more diverse perspectives in the assessment of nature's values, some researchers suggested the

Life Framework of Values to capture the global multiple ways in which people value nature. This framework aims at facilitating the expression of values that tend to be concealed in the usage of the concept of ecosystem services, because “if these ethical values are not elicited, they may not be considered in subsequent decision-making” (O’Connor and Kenter, 2019; Kenter et al. 2019; Meinard et al. 2016).

The Life Framework of Values provides a taxonomy to articulate different ways of valuing nature and the world. O’Neill et al. (2008) distinguished three ways in which the world matters to human beings. We first *live from* the world, as we fundamentally depend on the environment, for the fulfilment of our bodily needs (food, water, air, shelter, etc.), and for learning, inspiration and other various experiences. This first dimension is captured in the concept of ecosystem services that shows the different ways in which the environment matters to humans as a resource and provides us with a series of essential services. Second, we also *live with* nature and other species perceived as important others with whom we share the world. This view values nonhuman elements of the world as *others* who matter precisely because they are different from us. Human-nature dualism underpins this way of valuing the environment because we live *with* it. Third, we *live in* the world as a place that is the stage and matrix for our lives. *Living in* the world encompasses aspects of attachment to the land dear to many indigenous and local communities (e.g. Himes and Muraca 2018).

Kenter and O’Connor added the fourth dimension of *living as* the world. *Living as* the world “points out to the more-than-human as *self*, individually and collectively” (2019, emphasis in the original). They illustrate this fourth dimension with aspects as various as “indigenous notions of oneness and kinship” (Gould et al. 2019), embodied and relation perspectives on life (Raymond et al. 2017), Deep Ecology (Naess 1988) and “non-dual spiritual experience” (Wilber 2001). Putting together so diverse aspects rooted in radically different traditions and worldviews not only makes the category of *living as* unclear and ambiguous, but it also presents important difficulties. To illustrate these difficulties, let us briefly sketch the debates between Deep Ecology, ecofeminism and accounts of “non-dual” “Asian” traditions.

Deep Ecology claims that living beings have inherent worth regardless of their instrumental value compared to human needs (Drengson and Inoue 1995). Various formulations of this claim became the central demand of ecocentrism, which built itself in opposition to anthropocentrism. In particular, the “intrinsic

value of nature” has been argued to be anthropogenic (Callicott 1986, 142-143), or “discovered, not generated, by the valuer” (Rolston III 1988, 116). Yet, crucially, as values and meanings require thinking agents, this claim is deemed to be nothing but a normative assumption depending exclusively on the beliefs of the individual human beings defending this claim. In other words, natural elements can have “intrinsic” values only insofar as some individual human beings believe so. Thus, it *cannot* be argued for exclusively on objective or factual grounds, but must be defended transparently as a normative claim held by human individuals and groups. As a self-designed ecocentric theory, Deep Ecology rejects any claim of superiority of the human species over other species in the natural world (Seed et al. 1988, 36). The realization of our intimate dependency to the environment would lead the individual to adopt a strong ecocentric perspective, and to “expand the self” in an identification process with “others”, including other human beings, other animals, other living beings, ecosystems, and finally, the whole biosphere (Bragg 1996; Naess 1973, 1988).

Ecofeminist thinkers also oppose the conception of the human self rooted in contemporary modern capitalist society and originated in patriarchal religious traditions placing human –especially man– as a ruler and a master above the rest of the living beings (Warren 1990; Plumwood 1993). Yet, many worry that the dissolution of the self in the environment, as implied by Deep Ecology thinking, may lead to a disappearance of agency and a dilution of responsibility. In particular, Val Plumwood argues that while Deep Ecology recognizes rightfully the wrongness of the dualism separating human from nature, its answer is a process of unification; “a metaphysics that insists that everything is really part of and indistinguishable from everything else” (1991, 13). By doing so, Deep Ecology is falling into a kind of atomism ignoring differences which are fundamental parts of everyday life (Grimshaw 1986), and a requirement to identify and address the different needs of other living beings.

Proponents of ecocentrism and biocentrism sometimes suggest that Asian traditions that include meditative practices support the account of non-dual spiritual experiences of dissolution of the self in the world (e.g. Curtin 1994, James 2016, Loy 1999). Yet, utmost care must be taken when addressing the incredible diversity of “Asian traditions” and “mindfulness practices”. Indeed, there is a large scholarship within Asian traditions of thoughts that discusses the relation between humans and their world (e.g. Imanishi 2011, Yuasa 1987, Cheng 2014). For example, in Buddhist studies only, there are multiple records of

traditions presenting “non-dual spiritual experience”, which nevertheless are rooted in radically different worldviews, in particular regarding the relation between human beings (or monks in particular) and the world (or natural elements in particular) (e.g. Dunne 2011). Needless to say, putting in the same box these highly diverse spiritual experiences triggered by meditation practices and other “indigenous notions of oneness and kinship” is not self-evident and requires justifications. Seen through the lenses of the dominant worldview of materialist and instrumental dualism, it is unsurprising that these various traditions appear to present similarities (McCarthy 2010). However, approached from within one of the aforementioned traditions, they might present irreconcilable differences. Moreover, while arguing for non-duality, many of these traditions still attribute a particularly privileged status to human beings compared to other living things. This is unsurprising, as modes of relation to nature depend on human-made social conventions, as suggested by the anthropologist Descola (2011).

3. Living through Nature

Setting aside those ambiguities regarding living *as*, living *from*, *with*, *in*, *as* nature does not encapsulate the dynamicity and temporality of the relation itself. In contrast, each of these four axes of the Life Framework of Values seems to presuppose the existence of two separable elements (humans and nature), and describes different ways in which they can relate. *Living from* captures an instrumental relation in which we, as agents, take what we want from the objectified nature. *Living in* partially includes relational values the importance that some elements of our surroundings, including the land itself, can have for us on a symbolic and identity- level. *Living with* reflects a dualist –but not necessarily hierarchical– relation in which human beings are cohabiting with sublime, dangerous and wild otherness, to which are attributed intrinsic values. Finally, *living as* tends to overlap the “human” element on the “natural” element and seeks correspondences, or even oneness, possibly at the expense of the concrete differences. Notably, *living as* might tend to erase the fundamentally human standpoint of our experiences and understanding. This obliteration risks concealing differences in needs, and thus faces the risk of judging other species’ needs and existence relatively to human needs, values and limited perceptions, as it is pointed out by the ecofeminist critique of Deep Ecology.

Previously, we established that we never access the environment *as it is*, and

that there are no values, norms and meaning to be found *in* the environment itself. Both our relation to the environment and our decision-making processes regarding what we do and what matters to us are mediated by webs of meanings and norms that cover our surroundings. These can be referred to as the “milieu”, a term coined by Augustin Berque (1996) and inspired by Watsuji Tetsurō’s (1889-1960) concept of *fūdo* 風土 (2004). The milieu, that is the environment as lived and perceived by subjective human beings, articulates immaterial worldviews, material usages of the space and attachment to the land (Droz 2018). Indeed, worldviews, ideas and values are not floating in an immaterial vacuum from which individuals freely pick up what they prefer and build their own lenses and opinions. Instead, we grow up in a particular sociocultural context, within a political and social structure, and we learn to express ourselves and think in a specific language. This is how the milieu as a matrix shapes who we are and what we can do. We make sense of the world through our interactions with others, and our behaviours are guided by the practices that are common and accepted in the place where we live. Even what we can imagine is largely limited by our cultural imaginary.

The relation between human beings and their surrounding environment is dynamic and historical. On the one hand, there are no fixed borders between individuals and their surroundings. Instead, we are in a state of constant change, at the nexus of various flows. On the other hand, these changes unfold through time. As individuals, we live and die. We are growing old, getting sick, changing of social positions and worldviews. It is difficult to put limits and to draw borders between the elements of the webs of relations that constitute the milieu. *Living through* the world and nature might capture better the dynamicity and temporality of the relation.

There are two facets to *living through*: the porosity of borders and the temporal impermanence of things. First, borders are blurred, porous and flexible. As individuals, we are clearly *living through* the world. Identity, self-image and social status are dialectically built and changing through interactions with others (Hermans 2011). The fact that ideas, meaning and values are built and changed through participatory sense-making implies that they do not belong to or are made up by particular individuals alone (De Jaegher et al. 2016). Instead, they appear as the only partially intentional result of countless more or less deliberate interactions with others and the world. The borders of the body are also porous (Yuasa 1987). Our body is continuously breathing and exchanging elements with

its immediate surroundings. Recent studies in biology and medicine show the surprising reach of the effects of changes in the bacteria of our microbiomes on our health, including on our mood and levels of anxiety (O’Doherty et al. 2016, Rees et al. 2018). They show that our microbiomes are interacting with the biomes surrounding us. Our microbiome, which is closely linked to many bodily functionalities and moods, is constantly influenced not only by what we eat and absorb, but by what we breathe and touch, as well as by the microbiomes of the people surrounding us. Our agency too is constrained by the design of our surroundings. The idea of affordances coined by Gibson (1979) shows how our perceptions of our environment are determined by what we could and want to do. Unsurprisingly, there are a high variety of theories of the self that attempt to account for experiences of oneness (as mentioned in *living as*), for questions of body ownership expanded to prosthesis, for the inclusion of intimate family members in one’s own conception of the self, and for no-self arguments widespread in Buddhist and Taoist traditions.

Milieus themselves do not have clear and fixed borders. As they depend on the experience and practices of their subjective inhabitants, they are changing to the discretion of their habits. In particular, today’s high individual mobility for work or private purposes modifies the shapes and sizes of milieus and increases their porosity and mutual influences. Similarly, the drawing of borders of groups, be it nations, ethnicity or culture, is highly complex, multi-layered and political.

In place of borders and clearly delimited things, thinking in terms of flows might be more accurate and efficient. Flows are constantly moving *through* things in the world. We already mentioned flows of nourishment, nutrients, bacteria (air, food, etc.) at the micro scale of bodies. Ideas and values, mediated through communication technologies and global networks, are also flowing through geographical, linguistic and cultural borders. Studies of globalization made clear that flows of goods and information are today covering the whole globe. Admittedly, the porosity of borders and the ubiquity of flows does not *erase* borders. Our body is still delimited by our skin, and we still perceive the world from our specific standpoint. Similarly, nation states still have geographical borders, and flows of information on the Internet are largely guided by sociocultural affinities, linguistic limitations and political censorship. Nevertheless, the porosity of borders is challenging the belief that there *are* clearly delimited things that can be fully separated from each other. The relation between things in the world (whatever scale or criteria we use to define “things”) does not

appear to be optional or secondary to the existence of these things. Instead, things –including human beings and natural elements– are interdependent, mutually determined and inseparable.

Yet, if ideas and values can flow between milieus and if various worldviews can coexist in the same shared milieu, they are still anchored in particular milieus, embodied in the practices and behaviours of their beholders. Because, again, they do not exist independently of individual phenomenological agents, and the latter are always embodied and situated at a particular historical and geographical point. Which means that we can partially situate particular worldviews, the practices they support and their concrete impacts on the world in specific milieus. This gives us leverage points to identify what bundle of values and meanings are at the root of some practices and projects that lead to harmful environmental consequences. Besides, thanks to its concrete local anchorage, the milieu allows us to approach the diversity of practices and worldviews without resting on assumption of national or ethnic homogeneity. Indeed, any local milieu is irreducibly particular if only by virtue of the specific historical and geographical features of the place. So the experiences and ways of life of its inhabitants will inevitably be particular, regardless of the political attempts to conceal its particularity under a cover of sociocultural unity.

The second facet of *living through* the world or nature is temporal impermanence. Birth, growth, aging, reproduction and death are central characteristics of human life, and even of life in general. While the definition of life in sciences is still widely debated, it is largely consensual that living things “take in energy from the environment and transform it for growth and reproduction” and that they “respond, and their stimulation fosters a reaction-like motion, recoil, and in advanced forms, learning.”² Abstractly said, transmission and adaptation of information appear to be a key aspect of life. Human birth, death and reproduction are associated with various rituals, meanings and symbols in different sociocultural milieus. They give rhythm to the life of the individual, and the “life” of the community. But temporal impermanence is not limited to our bodies and physical things. Individuals learn and change of beliefs and habits. Ideas, beliefs, values and worldviews are also changing, gaining popularity or sinking into oblivion. Still, in comparison with the individual life span, worldviews and ideas appear to have some inertia.

² https://www.nasa.gov/vision/universe/starsgalaxies/life%27s_working_definition.html. Consulted on October 2nd 2019.

The bundle of meanings, practices, values and beliefs anchored in particular local environments that constitute milieus is continued, changed and transmitted throughout generations. As we have seen, the individual is shaped and guided by the milieu as a matrix and shapes the milieu through the imprints left by her actions (Berque, 1996). The individual lives, influences and is influenced by different milieus, and dies. Yet, *through* her way of life, the individual embodies and transmits meanings and values. The traces that the individual left in the milieu(s) continue to exist beyond her death (Droz, 2019). These traces can be material in the form of buildings or books, or they might be projects and ideas that survive the individual. The individual legacy, her posthumous reputation, her ideals and projects, but also her family and children continue to exist in her milieu after her death, at least for a while. In short, the milieu carries the signifying traces of the past, co-creates significance with the living human beings and transmits it to the future.

This historical process of transmission of values and meaning is not ineluctable and neutral. It is mediated by our individual decision-making and by common policies, educational programs and large-scale projects. Notably, because we have some choice to do otherwise, we are also ethically responsible for the consequences of our way of life. By acting and thinking in a particular way, we support its existence and transmission, including beyond our death. These considerations reflect the highly political and ethical nature of questions of cultural survival and endangered languages and knowledge. Crucially, the continuation of particular worldviews is not uniquely immaterial, but also has concrete physical impacts. Indeed, the continuation of particular ways of life in a milieu is maintaining specific landscapes, and supporting particular ecosystems that depend on human activities (Flint et al. 2013).

To summarize, the impermanence and the close intertwining of the sociocultural and environmental aspects of human life indicate how we are *living through* the world. We are constantly mutually influencing each other's worldviews and values, and changing as a result. Moreover, these worldviews and values encourage ways of life that supports different types of ecosystems and species. *Living through* milieus captures the impermanent dynamicity of the relation between humans and their environment, and the porosity of their borders. It sketches worldviews based on processes and flows that are continuously in movements, in the line of recent developments in "process philosophy" (Winters 2017; Seibt 2018).

4. Example: Dōgen's Impermanence

Living through was characterized by the temporal impermanence of things and their interdependence, as their porous borders are constantly permeated by various flows. *Living through* insists on the difficulty to draw fixed lines between two separate objects (such as humans and nature). It does not reject the other types of relations captured by the other prepositions, but adds another dimension. The relation between humans and nature can be seen as an instrumental relation between subjects and objects (*from*), as side-by-side coexistence (*with*), as nature providing a passive contextual receptacle (*in*), and as filled with correspondences and overlaps (*as*). In addition, the relation between humans and nature can be understood as interdependent, constantly changing and mutual interpenetrating (*through*). Echoes of each of these types of valuation can be found within most the worldviews and sociocultural contexts, with varying emphasis given to each. The emphasis on instrumental aspects of *living from* nature is well-known and largely dominating political and economic discourses nowadays. In contrast, let us briefly explore a radically different worldview that gave centrality to the aspect of *living through* nature.

The impermanence of things is one of the foundational claims of Buddhism. About 800 years ago, the Japanese Buddhist monk Dōgen (1200-1253) left his original affiliation with the Tendai School and founded a rival school of Zen Buddhism (Sōtō) after returning from his trip in China (Yokoi 1976). He left an extensive collection of texts that are still studied nowadays and remains a central figure of Zen Buddhism (Nishiyama and Stevens 1977, Takahashi 1983). The interpretation of Dōgen's work is recognized to be hard, and attempting to draw different types of valuation of nature from his texts might appear to be anachronistic. An important first obstacle in treating the valuation of "nature" in Dōgen's work is the very fact that the concept of was nonexistent in his historical and geographical context. The concept of "nature" as construed contemporary sciences was introduced in Japan in 1796 as a translation from Dutch into "jizen" (自然, pronounced today as *shizen*) (Iwanami Buddhism Dictionary 1989; Iwanami Encyclopedia of Philosophy 1998; Janel 2015). Before this translation, the word *shizen* had a different meaning rooted in Ancient Chinese. In particular, *ziran* (its Chinese pronunciation) was used by Laozi in relation with a way of being characterized by non-doing (*wuwei*) that humans can or should practice, and

with the co-determined emergence of things (*Yinyuan*), a fundamental premise in both Buddhist and Taoist cosmologies. *Ziran* as a translation for the Western "Nature" is likely to have been taken back into Chinese from the Japanese translation. Both meanings (Way of being existing by itself, and Western-style nature) coexist nowadays in the Chinese word *Ziran* and the modern Japanese word *shizen* (written with the same Chinese characters). There are other words that might get close to the idea of nature within these traditions, such as the equivalents for "world", of "under heaven", but they tend to include human beings in opposition to other godly realms and carry strong connotations intertwined in Buddhist and Taoist cosmologies. Still today, this historical background raises important difficulties in the approach and the discourses of "values of nature" in East Asia.

Nevertheless, these difficulties perfectly illustrate the role of worldviews as the lenses that limit and shape how we see and make sense of the world. Dōgen himself warned us that we "should not be limited to human views" and "naïvely think that what one views as water is "what dragons and fish see as water and use as water." (Dōgen 1990: 2:198). While there was no clear opposition between "humans" and nature, because there was nothing such as the contemporary concept of nature, Dōgen still recognized the particularity of our human lenses. In other words, he noted that we are *living with* other living beings who perceive the world differently than us. He further acknowledged, in another text, that the living beings are living *from* and *in* their own environment:

Fish swim through water, and swim as they may there is no limit to the water. Birds fly through the sky, and fly as they may there is no limit to the sky. And yet, fish and birds have never once left the water or sky. It is just that when the required activity is great the use is great, and when the need is small the use is small. In this manner, although they never fail to exhaust the borders of each and every point, turning about [freely] here and there, if a bird were to leave the sky, or if a fish were to leave the water, they would die instantly. One should know that [for a fish] life *is* by means of water, and [for a bird] life *is* by means of the sky. It is [also] the case that life *is* by means of birds and fish. And by means of life birds and fish are able to be. Moreover, we should proceed a step further. That there is the verification-in-practice of [human] lives is also just like this (Genjokoan, translation by Davis, 2009, 258).

Dōgen highlighted here the instrumental dependence of fishes, birds and humans on our direct environment, as each lives “by means of”, that is, *from* it. In addition, he pointed out that living things never leave their particular milieu, because if they did, they would “die instantly”. In other words, we are always *living in* a specific world or milieu on which we existentially depend. He adds that even if the fish were to leave water and aim at the sky, it “could not find its way or attain its place in” it. That is because this way of life, “this place, is neither great nor small, neither self nor other, neither already in existence nor [first] manifesting now, it is just as it is”. We belong to a place, to our milieu, in a way that there is no clear border separating it from us, and in a way that we could not exist “truly” out of it.

In his historical, geographical and religious context, Dōgen’s revolutionary philosophical stance was to claim that all things have Buddha nature. He writes that “the grasses, trees and lands”, like “the sun, moon, and stars are mind; because they are mind, they are living beings; because they are living beings, they “have the Buddha nature.””(Busshō, translation by Bielefeldt, 2010, 21). Here is not the place to dive in the depths of his mysticism. Still, this description hinges at valuing living things in the world because of they share the same nature as human beings do, and thus *living as* living things, each *in* our specific place in the world. This perspective finds echoes in recent multispecies research that places human beings as members of a community of diverse species (e.g. Ogden et al. 2013; Locke and Muenster 2015; Kirskey and Helmreich 2010).

Echoes of *living as* the world are also found in Dōgen’s most famous quote that points at the spiritual experience of oneness towards which practitioners must aim: “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things [of the world]. To be verified by the myriad things is to let drop off the body-mind of the self and the body-mind of others.” (Genjokoan, translation by Davis, 2009, 256). By carefully studying ourselves, we would notice the porous and artificial nature of the separation between us and the world. Izutsu explains:

One cannot *become* water because one is observing it from outside, that is to say, because the ego is, as an outsider, looking at water as an “object”. Instead of doing so, Zen continues to argue, one must first learn to “forget one’s ego-subject” and let oneself be completely absorbed into the water. One would then be flowing *as* the flowing river. No more would there be

any consciousness or ego. Nor would there be any “consciousness of” the water. Strictly speaking, it is not even the case that one *becomes* the water and flows on as the water. [...] Simply: The water flows on. No more, no less” (Izutsu 1982: 81).

Interestingly, the tensions found in expressions such as “flowing *as* the river”, widely discussed in Buddhist studies, echo the debates between Deep Ecology and ecofeminism regarding the dangerous dissolution of the self that could lead to a disappearance of agency and responsibility.

Crucially, the experience of *living as* is for most practitioners a temporary exercise and not a constant state of being, namely, that we are *living through* the world. The experience of weakening the borders between the self and the world teaches us that the borders separating things in the world are porous and sheds light on the fundamental interdependence of all things. Dynamic interdependence is one facet of *living through* the world. The second facet, impermanence, is recurrent in Dōgen’s discussion of time (Moriyama and Sakon, 2018), and clearly transpires from this last quote: “In a like manner, if one tries to discern the myriad things with confused assumptions about the body-mind, it can mistakenly seem as though one’s own mind and nature are permanent.” (Genjokoan, translation by Davis, 2009, 257).

In sum, the aspects of living *from*, *in*, *with*, *as* and *through* the world can be found together in Dōgen’s work. As it appears from this short depiction of his worldview, he does not emphasize aspects of living *from* the world as do current dominant worldviews. Instead, he stresses the interdependence and impermanence of the “myriad things” and warns us against the common mistaken assumptions of fixed and permanent independent beings, starting with ourselves. The spotlight is shed on how we are *living through* the world, as impermanent and interdependent living beings.

5. Conclusion

Global environmental issues present us with the need to understand how individuals and groups value nature and the world through their own situated worldviews. We need to understand what meanings different people give to life and nature in order to find some common grounds and tackle together global environmental problems. Yet, we always access ourselves and the world through

the lenses of our situated sociocultural worldview, tainted with normative values and judgements. Such questions regarding meaning of life and nature require an interdisciplinary dialogue, especially in a global and diverse context. Accordingly, this paper bridged inputs from ecology, anthropology, environmental ethics, Japanese philosophy and philosophy of meaning in life.

One of the current interdisciplinary framework to map the different ways in which nature matters to humans is the Life Framework of Values. It is composed of four axes; living *from*, *with*, *in* and *as* nature or the world. Yet, these four axes fail to capture the dynamicity and temporality of the relation between humans and their surrounding reality. This paper highlighted a possible fifth dimension: living *through* nature. We are continuously in changing and interdependent interactions with our milieu, shaping it and being shaped by it. Flows keep crossing the porous and dynamic borders of our body and communities. This dimension of *living through* was briefly illustrated by the example of Dōgen's philosophy of interdependence and impermanence.

As individual, sociocultural groups and humanity, we are *living through* the world. We exist as a nexus of flows. We have the possibility to influence the orientation of these flows; that is ethical decision-making. We exist *in* the midst of these flows, but we cannot separate ourselves *from* them, or fully objectify them into something we are living *with*, or completely erase differences and equalize us *as* the world. Nowadays, communication media and the internet confront us with flows of diverse meanings and values that are often taken out of their contextual worldview, increasing the risks of misunderstandings and conflicts. It is thus crucial to remind us that besides some general considerations that human life requires some basic environmental and social conditions, questions regarding meaning and value remain normative. Meanings and values are not to be found in reality, but they are to be assigned from within a particular worldview, and embodied and lived by subjective human individuals. Importantly, any single permanent global answer to these normative questions would risk imposing the subjective perspective of a dominant group at the expenses of other worldviews.

To foster intercultural collaboration and minimize conflicts and misunderstanding, we need to understand better the various ways in which we value and make sense of nature. In this quest, the Life Framework of Values provides a precious starting point. The recent addition of the fourth dimension of *living as* is a particularly encouraging step towards including worldviews that are usually marginalized in global political and scientific discourses. Yet, as shown in

this paper, some perspectives on the temporality and dynamicity of human life still seem difficult to account for with the four dimensions *living from, with, in* and *as*, and would be better captured by *living through*.

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Nothingness, the Self, and the Meaning of Life

Nishida, Nishitani, and Japanese Psychotherapeutic Approaches to the Challenge of Nihilism

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Abstract

In my paper I propose to explore how four influential 20th century philosophers and psychotherapists in Japan, Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, Morita Masatake and Yoshimoto Ishin have given shape to their meditations on nothingness, emptiness and the self, and in what ways did their works point to similar directions when it comes to the question of fending off the dangers of nihilism and finding a new meaning in life. After introducing various concepts of nihilism and setting the historical and intellectual context of the era, I shall delve into the theoretical configurations of the self in relation to nothingness and emptiness in Nishida's, Morita's, Nishitani's and Yoshimoto's views. The paper will conclude with the delineation of some common features in the four thinkers' oeuvre that could assist the self in getting rid of the threat of nihilism by transforming itself into an emotionally and existentially more stable mode of being.

Keywords: *Nihilism, Nishida, Nishitani, Naikan therapy, Morita therapy.*

1. Introduction

Some ten years after listening to Heidegger's lectures at the University of Freiburg on Nietzsche and nihilism, Nishitani Keiji, one of modern Japan's most original and insightful philosophers, has decided to give a series of lectures in Kyoto which got published in 1949 under the title *Nihilism*.¹ The text warns against the imminent dangers of nihilism and explains its particular relevance to Japan. In his precautionary remarks and in-depth analysis Nishitani makes it clear that nihilism is not merely a European or western phenomenon: it has spread way beyond its point of historical emergence, and thus holds serious threats to the cultural lives and national identities of other countries, among them Japan, as well. Why is that so? How could European nihilism be a serious hazard to the Japanese culture? Nishitani explains that it is because Japan is *already* in a deep crisis. In

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¹ Parkes (1990). p. xvi.

fact, Japan has been in crisis for some time, but the crisis had gone largely unnoticed. Consequently, Japan is unaware in terms of the extent of the spiritual malaise and the menacing ennui that has been swirling forebodingly under the surface of its manifest historical events.² The movement of nihilism conceals itself extraordinarily well, and therein lies the essence of its danger: that it can escalate in a barely noticeable yet fairly rapid manner. Nishitani expounds:

Up until the middle of the Meiji period a spiritual basis and highly developed tradition was alive in the hearts and minds of the people. Indeed, the reason Japan was able to take in western culture with such unprecedented alacrity was that people then were possessed of true ability born of spiritual substance. However, as Europeanization (and Americanization) proceeded, this spiritual core began to decay in subsequent generations, until it is now a vast, gaping void in our ground.

3

This “vast, gaping void” at the core of one’s existence is not a matter that could be labeled as unique to this historical period or could be simply understood as the consequence of a mere chronological chain of events that comes from the past and leads to the now. For Nishitani, as for his predecessors like Nietzsche and Heidegger, the nature of nihilism could be conceived in essentially twofold ways: one, it can be seen as universal and existential; two, as particular and historical. This duality is something that can and should be grasped in one single vision in order to understand how nihilism operates in actual reality; neither aspect of its movement ought to be downplayed. What is crucial here is that the problem should not be objectified and externalized as though it were just another problem among many others. The question of nihilism is the most urgent, the most personal and radical of all.⁴

“On the one hand, nihilism is a problem that transcends time and space and is rooted in the essence of human being, an existential problem in which the being of the self is revealed to the self itself as something groundless.”⁵ For Nishitani,

² Nishitani (1990), p. 177: “As noted above, our crisis is compounded by the fact that not only are we in it but we do not know that our situation is critical. Thus our first task is to realize that the crisis exists in us, that modern Japan is a living contradiction with a hollowness in its spiritual foundations.”

³ Op.cit., p. 175.

⁴ Op.cit., p. 2: “In short, nihilism refuses treatment as merely an external problem for one's self, or even contemplation as a problem internal to each individual self. This is the essence of nihilism. (...) Nihilism demands that each individual carry out an experiment within the self.”

⁵ Op.cit., p. 3.

the existential side is clearly very important and not something to be neglected. Nevertheless, the void is always there for the individual as the groundless ground of its personal existence. Although this fact is habitually covered up and made forgotten by the cultural structures of the civilization into which one is born, when these structures experience a deep and lasting inner crisis one cannot avoid to see the true groundless nature of one's existence. At times like this the uncomfortable truth comes to the fore, namely, that where one assumed to have fixed and reliable ontological foundations to be present there is nothing save for a formless void. Recognizing the presence of the abyss is agonizing, yet it is the only way that can revitalize the creative spiritual energies of both the individual and the civilization *in toto*.

The essential thing is to overcome our inner void, and here European nihilism is of critical relevance in that it can impart a radical twist to our present situation and thereby point a way toward overcoming the spiritual hollowness. This is the second significance that nihilism holds for us. The reason the void was generated in the spiritual foundation of the Japanese in the first place was that we rushed earnestly into westernization and in the process forgot ourselves.⁶

Nishitani's thoroughgoing analysis, no matter how convincing and alarming it may sound, has been formulated in a cultural milieu and historical era that is obviously not identical to the one we live in at the current moment, some seventy or eighty years after his thoughts were put down on paper. But is this era so entirely different than the one in which Nishitani lived? Has the danger of nihilism, in its second, historical sense, been successfully fended off and done away from among our primary cultural concerns? There may be some voices today again that would argue that historical nihilism is still lurking around, it still has not been overcome or replaced by anything more constructive and reassuring compared with the "gaping void".⁷ These voices might feel inclined to claim that a major shift has never taken place, but, instead, the long lasting decadent and self-destructive trends of the western world resulted in the evident multiplication and the deepening of the various crises that seem to produce new challenges by the

⁶ Op.cit., p. 178.

⁷ See for instance Diken (2009), pp. 1-7; Levin (1988), pp. 4-5; Possenti (2014), pp. 211-13; Severino (2014); Tartaglia (2016) pp. 21-25.

day.⁸

Among these voices James Tartaglia's is one of the most salient nowadays. He contends in his 2016 book *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* that instead of rejecting nihilism or trying to fight it, one should rather embrace it, because human life *is* indeed meaningless. "There is no overall point to human life. We are each of us born into a certain specific situation, at a particular place, in a particular historical epoch, and with particular parents, and from this unchosen starting point we must continue to exist until our time runs out."⁹ Tartaglia goes on to argue that although human life does not have an unequivocal comprehensive meaning, this is no reason to despair after all. Nihilism has the power to reinvigorate not only philosophy but one's attitude towards life's goals as well. The philosophy of the meaning of life is inherently connected with the fact that we are living in a nihilistic age, but according to Tartaglia, this is not an issue that should be overcome. Nihilism is a fact of human life, and if one intends to improve the current situation, one ought to see nihilism in a positive light, in lieu of attempting to replace it with a purportedly more sensible approach to life: an approach that no one really knows what it consists in.

Some might even argue that non-western cultures, like Japan, which have been profoundly influenced by most aspects, both positive and negative, of western civilization, could not yet actually renew and regenerate themselves, but are still fundamentally at the same historical situation by and large where they had been sixty or eighty years ago. It may be plausibly posited that Japan is still searching for its own identity, and this long-going/ongoing search has not been without its difficulties and drawbacks. As professor Kazushige Shingu, renowned psychotherapist and psychiatrist from Nara University, has noted not long ago:

There is an increasing social demand for identity because in Japan we faced, initially, the collapse of the traditional construction of society based on Confucianism and Buddhism, later the opposition between East and West, between Communist and Liberal world. Now also this structure crashed and we are facing the overwhelming power of Neoliberalism. (...) We are living a deeply ambivalent and contradictory situation and it is true that, in this situation, we have

⁸ Possenti (2014), p. 211: "Having captured the spiritual sensibilities of an entire age, nihilism has now become the prevailing cultural climate in which we live. It is the air we breathe from birth, the irreplaceable lens through which we view every problem. Nihilism is thus the term that best sums up human civilization's march toward decadence; it is a negative nihilism that saps us of the will to live and work."

⁹ Tartaglia (2016), p. 21.

the tendency to close into ourselves, as if we were psychoanalyzing ourselves (...) I think this is a cause of suffering.¹⁰

Discovering – or creating anew – its own identity and an overall meaning of life while trying to find a way out of the distressing situation that causes widespread suffering and increased mental disturbances among the population is a cardinal goal for which Japan has been striving for a considerable time through various channels. If we follow them, some of these channels will lead us into the camps of Kyoto School philosophy, while others into the mental health care circles of Morita and Naikan therapies. In what follows we will investigate how Nishida Kitarō, along with Nishitani Keiji, worked on a potentially promising philosophical way out of nihilism, while Morita Masatake and Yoshimoto Ishin have developed two dissimilar, yet apparently converging therapeutic approaches that are embedded in the Buddhist tradition. All these scholarly and pragmatic endeavors have yielded a seemingly new, yet, at its core, a rather ancient foundation to a form of ethics which aims to cope with the challenges posed by nihilism. This ethics, as we will soon have an opportunity to observe, does not intend to cover up the existential void of nihilism but, instead, attempts to build a bridge over it while leaving the void in plain sight. Nevertheless, before turning our attention to the intellectual labor carried out by Nishida, Nishitani, Morita and Yoshimoto of bridging the void of nihilism, first we need to deepen our understanding regarding the true nature of the threat, in order to see how nihilism has come to be the notoriously dreaded cultural phenomenon of the modern period

2. The Advancement of the History of Nihilism

The modern epoch brought into being a world in which the effects of nihilism are spreading. Now, we can see, today, if we look with care and thought, that nihilism is a rage against Being: ‘nihilism’ means the destruction of Being: the Being of all beings, including that way of being which we call ‘human’ and consider to be our own.¹¹

If there is a single philosopher who is routinely associated with the notion of nihilism then that person is, without doubt, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s musings on the emergence of nihilism from the cultural logic of Christianity is as

¹⁰ Bucci et al. (2014), p. 122.

¹¹ Levin (1988), p. 5.

well-known as his prophesied solution for the problem of nihilism which he declared to have found in the overcoming of man by the overman (*Übermensch*) and in creating new values instead of the hollowed-out old ones. Nietzsche was confessedly a nihilist himself in the sense of striving to actively assist the unavoidable progress of nihilism to come to its fruition with the explicit aim of propelling the development of European history to its subsequent, post-nihilistic stage. Nietzsche saw himself as much an outstanding herald of the times disseminating the news about the imminent advent of the mass decline of European civilization as the chosen thinker in whom the nihilistic tendencies of the west have culminated. Notwithstanding his apparent merits in laying bare the scarcely perceptible progression of the movement of nihilism, it would be a mistake to fall for Nietzsche's less than modest, somewhat self-aggrandizing presentation concerning the origins of nihilism. As Slocombe reminds us, "Nihilism did not originate with Nietzsche, however, and neither did it end with him. Before Nietzsche, philosophies of nihilism are evident from classical Greece to Enlightenment Europe; since Nietzsche, and especially since the Holocaust, nihilism is no longer a marginalized philosophy, but one that has become central to an understanding of the history of modernity and twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture."¹²

The first usage of the term "nihilism" in its philosophical sense can be traced back to a letter, dated 21st of March 1799, written by Jacobi and addressed to Fichte. In this letter Jacobi criticized Fichte for the kind of transcendental idealism, initiated by Kant and sustained by Fichte himself, which seeks to address all philosophical questions without involving anything external (i.e. God) to the self. This kind of transcendental idealism becomes, according to Jacobi, a form of 'nihilism' (*Nihilismus*). For if God is removed from philosophy, philosophy becomes sheer egoism or solipsism, and there remains *nothing* upon which the inquiring self could stand on. Consequently the self, without God, turns into an "empty self", and, *vice versa*, God, without its absolute validity, changes into nothingness.¹³ Following this famous letter, nihilism as a "term was generally connected with atheism and with a rejection of all existing sources of authority by critics such as Jacobi and Jean Paul, and later by Turgenev, and Dostoevsky. They were all convinced that if the I was posited as absolute, God was nothing, and that without God all authority could have no other basis than shifting human will and

¹² Slocombe (2005), p. 1.

¹³ Weller (2008), pp. 1-2.

opinion.”¹⁴ The connection of nihilism with atheism and the refusal of authority then grew even more pronounced when Russian radicals who came to be known as “Nihilists” started a political movement in the 1860s which was boldly propagating anarchistic ideals while rejecting all forms of authority from the Tsar to the Russian Orthodox Church to the aristocracy.¹⁵

Nietzsche referred to nihilism as the “uncanniest of all guests”. If nihilism is a guest, then it is certainly not the kind of the guest that would feel embarrassed about entering our home: it has come without invitation and will proceed without hesitation.¹⁶ Being uncanny, it will exude an eerie atmosphere; one does not know what to expect from it, but it is evident that its presence is palpably unsettling and is felt by everyone. Generally speaking, the notion of nihilism, even though its meaning is not unequivocally clear – in fact, it can denote several things at the same time – conveys an overwhelmingly *negative* sense: one expects something dreadful, sinister, destructive. As Weller observes, “Since its introduction into the discourse on modernity at the time of the French Revolution, targets for the charge of nihilism have included atheism, Christianity, Judaism, rationality, metaphysics, ontology, transcendental idealism, logocentrism, deconstruction, technology, democracy, Nazism, fascism, socialism, bolshevism, humanism, and anti-humanism.”¹⁷ Indeed, nihilism has been tied to almost any movement or *-ism* that appeared to be undesirable or hostile to its adversaries.¹⁸ Nevertheless, nihilism has not exclusively been characterized as negative or destructive. Marmysz comments that nihilism can – and has been – viewed as something positive or productive as well: a field or a ground that allows for previously unknown creative forces to appear.

The problem of nihilism (...) is nothing new. It is, in fact, a perennial

¹⁴ Gillespie (2015), p. 80.

¹⁵ Crosby (1988), p.4.

¹⁶ Metzger (2009a), p.1: “The figure of the guest, ‘standing at the door,’ suggests that he is foreign, an outsider or alien from whom one can safely dissociate or differentiate oneself. The fact that nihilism is the ‘uncanniest of all guests,’ however, suggests that he makes our home itself foreign and alien; his chill figure is not simply unwelcome, it renders us homeless (*heimatlos*).”

¹⁷ Weller (2011), pp. 9-10.

¹⁸ In the case of Leo Strauss, Nazism was the infamous manifestation and embodiment of German nihilism. See: Strauss (1999), pp. 357-358: “The fact of the matter is that German nihilism is not absolute nihilism, desire for the destruction of everything including oneself, but a desire for the destruction of something specific: of modern civilisation. That, if I may say so, limited nihilism becomes an almost absolute nihilism only for this reason: because the negation of modern civilisation, the No, is not guided, or accompanied, by any clear positive conception. German nihilism desires the destruction of modern civilisation as far as modern civilisation has a moral meaning.”

concern and a source of anxiety that has had an influence upon human life and thought throughout history. A phenomenon that has affected both individuals and whole cultures, nihilism has been likened to a “malaise,” a “cancer,” and a “sickness,” while also having been called a “divine way of thinking,” and an inspiration to artists and scholars. Nihilism has been deemed both a “disease” and a “cure”; something to be feared as well as welcomed. In short, it is a phenomenon that has been considered both an evil and a good.¹⁹

What positive features could nihilism possibly hold? For one thing, if one is to begin anything from scratch, nihilism is *the* sweeping power that has the potential to erase *anything* that would otherwise stand in the way and hinder the creation of revolutionary novelties. In order to give life to something new, naturally, something old needs to give way to it. As things stand, the old typically does not want to give up its place voluntarily to the new. The movement of nihilism can provide the necessary thrust that sets the emerging innovative forces free. That is why Nietzsche believed that a new beginning – which was symbolized in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by the carefree and obviously inventive play of the child – necessitates the prior destruction of the aged “tables of value”. Accordingly, Baker adds, “Nietzsche believed that the outcome of nihilism – the death of God – is itself the opportunity for what he terms ‘the great liberation’. Not the inexistence of God but his death”²⁰

The “death of God” stands for the lack of values, the pervading meaninglessness and the perceived futility of human life. Since the belief in the metaphysical truths and the entire Christian mega-narrative has crumbled, man has nowhere to turn but towards his innermost self. The triumph of subjectivity, whose gradual expansion began with the renaissance and Descartes, has come to its completion in the nihilistic individualisms of Stirner and Nietzsche. However, this supposed triumph is, in fact, also a staggering defeat, for the subject of epistemology, the *ego cogito* that has objectified the entire world, could not avoid the undesired outcome of objectifying itself as well in the end. Man has become just another field of inquiry for science, therefore the distance between himself and his knowledge of himself grew steadily until it came to be no longer bridgeable. Hence the self has lost touch with its authentic selfhood which points

¹⁹ Marmysz (2003), p.1.

²⁰ Baker (2018), p.1.

outside of its individual self and which could provide meaning and values.

The triumph of subjectivity is self-destructive, because it has inflated the human ego without developing self-respect, the true basis of agency, and the social character of human vision. Moreover, the triumph of ‘Man’ necessitated the death of God. But, since God had been the sole source of our values and the origin of all meaningfulness, the death of God only accelerated the spread of a latent culture of nihilism, cancer of the spirit, contagion of despair.²¹

As we have seen in the Introduction, Nishitani attended Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche’s Nihilism and has followed Heidegger’s philosophical etiology as to the causes of the spiritual pathology of western civilization. Heidegger famously claimed that the process of nihilism is an inevitable one, since it is practically coded into the advancing self-oblivion of western metaphysics. In other words, it could not have happened in any other way; it was the “destiny” of European intellectual history to have nihilism emerge from its underbelly at a certain point and allow it to blossom.²² In Heidegger’s view, even though Nietzsche maintained that western metaphysics had ended and a new epoch had begun with him, Nietzsche was, indeed, still operating from within the same tradition that held him captive.²³ Heidegger, in a strikingly similar way as Nietzsche before him, asserted that *he* was the first one in the history of philosophy who had succeeded in overcoming the failings of the self-destructive western metaphysics and had instigated a new way of philosophizing; to be precise, a new way of *thinking* (*Denken*).

How did Heidegger see mankind’s responsibility in bringing about the advent of nihilism?

For Heidegger, modern man is ‘empty’ and estranged from the world, incapable of valuing, moved only by the restlessness of his ‘will to will’, by his sense of some endless possibility to enhance his subjectivity. Perhaps it would seem logical to conclude that, for Heidegger, modern

²¹ Levin (1988), p. 4.

²² Although not everyone agrees with Heidegger on this particular point. Rosen for instance states – Rosen (1969), p. xiv. – that, although the danger of nihilism is a permanent human possibility, the actual pervasive presence of nihilism today is due to a series of specific philosophical decisions in the past.”

²³ Mortensen (1994), pp.138-139.

man embodies the *nihil*, that modern man is the ‘nothing’ – yet, at precisely this point we would be wrong. (...) Aims are not lacking; they are, for modern man, everywhere and always bound up with the most important being – the self, *my* self, this one and no other, *me*. But is it not in this that, for Heidegger, a historically intensified forgetfulness of Being might lie? In other words, is modern man not the historical embodiment of near-absolute forgetfulness in which what Heidegger calls ‘everydayness’ becomes the only horizon of self- and world-understanding? And, in this sense, is modern man not *the* central character of destructive nihilism?²⁴

It is ambiguous, to say the least, as to whether Heidegger holds “modern man” morally accountable for unleashing – and, on occasion, actively implementing – the destructive powers of nihilism. His account of the History of Being seems to imply that the processes of history are destined to happen the way they do and the way they will do. On the other hand, it would be difficult to ignore the morally highly saturated rhetoric Heidegger tends to use whenever he analyzes and, in effect, criticizes modern science and particularly modern technology for enabling the spread of nihilism and the spiritual impoverishment of human existence. Yet, it is also Heidegger who pays heed to the developments of other intellectual and spiritual traditions, namely, Chinese and Japanese thought, and sometimes incorporates them – usually without giving them much credit – into his later philosophy. The fact that – and the manner in which – he keeps open the possibility of a renewal of western thinking, a “second beginning” by which nihilism would be surpassed is clearly significant. Furthermore, the key to the overcoming of nihilism in Heidegger might already be there in the movement of nihilism itself. As Cunningham perceptively observed, nihilism in its true sense cannot be such a one-sided negative phenomenon as it is regularly portrayed in a rather overly simplified fashion.

This conundrum merely points to the obvious fact that nihilism may lack God, but it also lacks this lack of God. Accompanying any radical absence is an absence of absence, and so to attribute a negativity to nihilism is one-sided. This type of accusation articulates its protestation

²⁴ Costea and Amiridis (2011), pp. 21-22.

only 'within the sides' of a metaphysical imputation, since it must presume the absence of nihilism so as to be able to accuse it. Such accusation takes the form of deeming nihilism nihilistic, and this, it is argued, need not be the case (...) If we are to speak seriously of nihilism we must, it seems, understand nihilism precisely to be an absence of nihilism: nihilism is not nihilistic. (...) Nihilism will provide values, gods, and most of all, it seems, intelligibility. Indeed, as we shall see, nihilism generates an excessive intelligibility.²⁵

3. Nothingness, Emptiness and the Self in Japanese Philosophy and Psychotherapy

If one accepts the above claim that nihilism is *not nihilistic* after all, that is to say, beyond its naturally destructive characteristics it has a positive aspect as well which permits new values and new meanings to emerge, one still wonders where these new values and meanings may rise from? If nothing exists any longer, if all that has been, is irretrievably lost, and the beings as we used to know them are no more, then the only fountainhead from which the new values could possibly spring forth is, indeed, *nothingness* itself. But what *is* nothingness? Is it a thing among others? If it is, how does it differ from any other being? Or is it perhaps a radically different reality which cannot be characterized by the traditional apparatus of ontology?

The advancement of nihilism has been whirling onward ruinously until it has reached its most radical conclusion, which is this: it can no longer destruct without having to build and create something new. The way beyond nihilism leads through it, as both Nietzsche and Nishitani agreed, so one cannot simply shy away or shun the consequences of its relentless advancement. The most immediate consequence of this progress is that it is impossible to turn back to the same values and the same narratives which were still valid before nihilism commenced its vicious ride. However, it is still possible to grab hold of that which is alive and life-giving in the old and make use of it for the new to come. As Nishitani argues:

Both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche anticipated the nihilism that was to come, and dared to descend to the depths of history and humanity to struggle

²⁵ Cunningham (2002), p. 170.

desperately against it. They can even lead us Japanese to the nihilism lurking in the ground of our historical actuality. But in order for us to take up the struggle, we need our own means. The way to overcome it must be of our own creation. Only then will the spiritual culture of the Orient which has been handed down through the ages be revitalized in a new transformation.²⁶

Nishitani was convinced that the way out of nihilism could only be reached by dipping into its heart and coming face to face with nothingness itself. One is instinctively reluctant to turn away from being and to bend instead towards nothingness, for nonbeing and nothingness are generally considered to be analogous with death and extinction which every healthy living instinct wants to avoid. Nevertheless, as Heidegger emphatically referred to nothingness as something that can be experienced in the existential mode of anxiety (*Angst*) which brings one's most authentic possibility for being to one's awareness, the encounter of nothingness is not only inevitable but it is also desirable; desirable in the sense that it facilitates the displacement of something worse, i.e. the all too powerful self-destructive strand of nihilism. The direct experience of existential anxiety, along with Dasein's running-forward-to-death and the chilling encounter of nothingness amidst the moment of *Angst* are justifiably dreaded scenarios that one would *never* look forward to. Yet, precisely this experience is that exceptional one which, by displaying the groundlessness of one's existence prepares one for the acceptance of a vision that demands no grounds for humans to be able to exist and even to thrive and flourish happily in life.

Despite the fact that Buddhism has been frequently accused, even by Nietzsche himself, of being through and through nihilistic and life-denying, Nishitani insists that "there is in Mahayana a standpoint that cannot be reached even by nihilism". He quickly adds though that, "For the present this standpoint remains buried in the tradition of the past, far from historical actuality."²⁷ Yet, this standpoint, which is the *standpoint of nothingness or emptiness*, is still potentially accessible for the seeking mind: one only needs to unearth the origins of the concepts of nothingness and emptiness and then witness how they endow with new values and meanings the moribund words and notions of our language and our narratives that had been long besieged by the negative forces of nihilism.

²⁶ Nishitani (1990), p. 181.

²⁷ Op. cit., p. 180-181.

During the time when Nishitani's predecessor, the originator of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitarō was a young intellectual seeking out a way to wed the ancient insights of Zen Buddhism²⁸ with the nomenclatures of modern western-style philosophy, taking good use of the antique texts of Buddhism was not an approach that was in the vogue in Japan. As the government dispatched many of its brightest young students and professionals to Europe and the United States in order "to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for modernization", the prior body of knowledge that was founded on Indian, Chinese and ancient Japanese religious texts and on dated scholarly discussions came to be heavily criticized and eventually abandoned by the most.²⁹ While the Japanese were looking for their identity, the religious past and the modernizing scientific present, especially in medical and religious circles, competed and clashed with each other.³⁰

At the outset, the explicitly expressed guiding principle of modernization in Japan was to borrow western technology and science but maintain Asian values. As the process unfolded, however, it became clear to many leading Japanese intellectuals that modernization brought with it ideas of self, society, knowledge, education, and ethics that ran counter to many traditional Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto values. (...) In response to the new ideas from the West, a great many philosophers in the Japanese academy simply abandoned the premodern traditions as sources for their work, devoting themselves entirely to expositions and critiques of major western figures.³¹

Sensing the damaging effects of this clash between the old and the new yet deliberately refusing to take sides, Nishida, and, about the same time, Morita Masatake, a famed psychiatrist at the prestigious Jikei University opted for elevating Buddhism back into the mainstream of philosophical and scientific discourses. In order to do this, they took advantage of the rich cultural heritage of

²⁸ On Nishida's Zen Buddhist practice of *zazen* in search of enlightenment see for example Uehara (2019), p. 578.

²⁹ Heisig et. al. (2011a), p.15: "Along with medicine, engineering, agriculture, postal systems, and education, knowledge of western thought was prized as a means to understand the foundations of modern society and the ideas behind western science and technology. Naturally, this would involve intimate familiarity with western philosophy. After a brief period of interest in British utilitarianism and American pragmatism, Japanese philosophers began to look to Germany for guidance."

³⁰ Harding (2015), pp. 4-12.

³¹ Heisig et. al. (2011a), p.15-16.

two well-respected archaic East Asian philosophical concepts: *nothingness* and *emptiness*. Nishida by planting the notion of *absolute nothingness* into the center of his conceptual framework and elaborating its crucial significance with regard to epistemology and ethics, whereas Morita by creating a unique form of psychotherapeutic practice which he based on the *emptying* of the self and on accepting reality as it is, the pragmatic reappropriation of these two concepts for modern Japan had began to take shape.

As Deguchi explains, nothingness and emptiness are “among the most important philosophical terms in East Asian thoughts. Emptiness, as a philosophical term, has an Indian origin; it is *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit, and was formulated in Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly in the *Paramīta sūtras* and the Mādhyamaka school. On the other hand, nothingness came from Chinese Daoism, especially the doctrine of reverence for nothingness”³² Nishida differentiates between relative and absolute nothingness. Whereas relative nothingness is relative to being, in other words, it is the denial and negation of a particular form of being, absolute nothingness is not relative to anything (thus it is absolute). To put it differently, absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*) is not determined or delineated by anything else. It is a place (*basho*) which encompasses anything else and from which particular beings form and emerge. As Krummel elucidates, it is the “horizonless horizon that contextualizes and makes possible every determination of being as well as their negation”.³³ Nishida’s position is akin to the Mahāyāna notion of the middle path or the emptiness of emptiness which stands between the negative (and relative) nothingness of nihilism and a substantialized version of nothingness which is liable to turn nothingness into yet another form of supreme being (similar to God or Being).³⁴

As Heisig observes, “One of the core ideas associated with the Kyoto School philosophers is that of a *self-awareness in which the self awakens to its true nature as no-self*.”³⁵ Regarding Nishida, the negation of the self and the goal of becoming the thing itself is a crucial part of his philosophical program from the outset. Becoming one with reality in a primordial, non-dual awareness is one of the principal goals of Nishida already in *Inquiry into the Good*, his first major

³² Deguchi (2014), p. 300: “When the Mahāyāna idea of emptiness was introduced into China, it was sometimes translated and explained as nothingness. Since then, these terms have been largely taken as synonyms in Buddhist philosophical discourse.”

³³ Krummel (2014), p. 272.

³⁴ Krummel (2014), p. 281.

³⁵ Heisig (2016), p. 187.

philosophical work. In order to this, in order to become united with reality in a non-dual awareness it is necessary to learn to empty the self and see things as they truly are without our subjective distortions and our reflexive interpretations.³⁶ When the subject and the object are completely joined in a single awareness, that is when the ego-self gets forgotten, and the totality of the experience may come to the fore. For the early Nishida the concept of “pure experience” was the starting point that was supposed to enable the self to rise above the subject-object division. Knowing things as they are is the goal of both philosophy and life in general, yet this kind of knowledge can only be acquired intuitively, according to Nishida. Pure experience is supposed to break through the ego-centered view of the self and reveal reality in an originary way. According to this view, the true or authentic self can only be encountered in pure experience when the self is lost in some kind of activity. At that moment the self loses its sense of itself and becomes completely “sincere”. This kind of sincerity appears spontaneously as soon as the awareness of the ego-self disappears.

Losing the self in a non-reflexive activity serves as the key to understanding Morita Masatake’s approach to psychotherapy as well. As a psychiatrist his chief aim was to find a method which would successfully treat neurotic patients suffering from anxiety-related diseases and depression. Similarly to Nishida, Morita was also not propagating Buddhism out in the open but decided rather to let his theory (and practice) be influenced by Zen Buddhist tenets and values in a more subtle manner. The tacit application of the *arugamama* principle which entails accepting reality *as it is*, without illusions and without self-deception, coupled with the self-emptying process that occurs while the patient is lead to directly face his or her problems and thus to build up a novel relation to the world from the ground up are essential features of Morita therapy.³⁷ According to this approach, reality can be experienced in a fundamentally different way than what we are used to in our everyday involvement with things and with other people. When one candidly and directly engages with the ever-changing stream of existence, a much deeper sort of involvement with reality can result whereby one comes to encounter the fine and delicately tangible events in the natural order of things. This experience is tantamount to losing one’s egoistic self and waking up to a new self that is safely grounded in the natural environment and is naturally selfless and compassionate. This new selfless self, by negating itself and through

³⁶ Carter (2013), p. 31.

³⁷ Morita, Shōma (1998), pp. 3-34.

disentangling itself from its own neurotic preoccupation with itself does not fall prey to the self-destructive tendencies of nihilism, albeit it does not cease to acknowledge the emptiness of its existence either.³⁸ Being completely immersed in the flux of reality the awareness of the subject merges into the tranquil and engaged observation of what appears in the field of consciousness. This might remind us of Nishida's notion of "sincerity" and the disappearance of the self amidst the pure experience of reality.

Turning back once again to Nishitani, one can readily observe how his analysis had been influenced by Nishida, and at the same, how he diverged from his predecessor in significant ways. Krummel points out that "Nishitani, borrowing the schema of Nishida, distinguishes emptiness as absolute nothingness (J. *zettai mu*) from nihility as relative nothingness (J. *sōtai mu*)."³⁹ However, in Nishitani's explanation "absolute negation" (*zettai hitei*) as the negation of negation becomes the "great affirmation" (*ōkina kōtei*), and it is on the Buddhist standpoint of emptiness as absolute "nothingness" that nihilism can be penetrated and thus overcome. In *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani distinguishes three different standpoints or modes of existence which correspond to the three fields of consciousness, nihility, and emptiness. Davis sums it up the following way:

On the field of consciousness (by which he means subjective, dualistic consciousness), we purport to know other persons and things; but in fact what we know are merely our own subjective representations of them. On the field of nihility (...) one realizes that there is an "absolute breach" between one's subjective consciousness and the things or persons it purports to represent. However, on the field of emptiness, one realizes that this "absolute breach" that distances one person or thing from another at the same time "points directly to a most intimate encounter with everything that exists." This "intimate encounter" is possible because underneath the abyss of nihility that separates subjective consciousness from everything else lies the field of emptiness that unites things in their differences.⁴⁰

³⁸ Chervenkova, Velizara (2017), pp. 45-60.

³⁹ Krummel (2019). p. 660.

⁴⁰ Davis (2017), p. 243.

The field of emptiness in Nishitani's analysis has a unifying power that breaks down the individual differences of the subjects and provides a groundless ground upon which the experience of values and meanings is possible yet again. As we may remember, nihilism has announced its arrival by bringing into awareness the meaninglessness of life and the valuelessness of all values. At a later point, however, nihilism came to its most radical when the emergence of new values and new meanings was bound to happen once again, owing to the activation of the positive forces that lie beneath the negative veneer of the movement of nihilism. "When things appear to be ultimately meaningless, without substance, we are forced by the negation of what we had taken for granted to take a step back to see the reality of our existence under a new light. This marks a fundamental conversion of life that comes to question our ego-centric and anthropo-centric assumptions".⁴¹

A conversion of an earlier self-centered vantage point to a selfless and altruistic one is also a hallmark feature of Naikan therapy which is another Japanese psychotherapeutic approach founded upon a venerable Buddhist tradition. The founder of Naikan therapy, Yoshimoto Ishin was a Shin Buddhist priest who created Naikan ("introspection") therapy out of the ancient ascetic practice of *mishirabe* the aim of which was the attainment of enlightenment (*satori*). Naikan theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of beings, and, in particular, the individual's sinful forgetfulness of his or her indebtedness to others. During the course of the highly structured procedure of the therapy the clients are to meditate on and come to terms with their self-serving narratives of the past, while realizing how biased their preferred ways of remembrances vis-à-vis their roles in past events have been. As soon as one learns to see one's life and the significance of other people's assistance in one's life in a less self-absorbed and self-protective manner, one will become more compassionate and feel reconnected to society and nature as a whole.⁴² Emptying the self, realizing an objective view of reality, and finding meaning in the appreciation of and gratefulness for one's immediate environment (family, friends, the Nature) are the ultimate goals of Naikan therapy.

Letting go is the key to Naikan therapy. One lets go of one's old, false image of the self and of the world. However, instead of being reborn or transformed into

⁴¹ Krummel (2019). p. 657.

⁴² Chervenkova (2017), pp. 81-128.

a new self, it is not the self but rather the *world* that changes form. It simply occurs as a result of the self's realization concerning its deep interconnectedness with the world: the self stops seeing the world as something external to itself. The transformed self is transformed because it does not prioritize itself over other selves any longer. One learns in Naikan that the world has blurry boundaries, and by caring for the world the self sustains itself just as much as the world sustains itself by caring for the self. *If I cause you pain the pain I cause you causes me pain, too*; for although you are not me and I am not you, you and I are not entirely separate, either. The sincere and profound gratitude one feels during and after Naikan for one's family and friends and for one's life in general brings one to the understanding as to our essential belonging with one another, with our ever changing, multiple selves, and with Nature or the Universe.⁴³

4. Conclusion

Having compared in a concise manner how Nishida, Morita, Nishitani and Yoshimoto have addressed the problems of meaninglessness, valuelessness and egocentrism that are all recognized to be the results of a pervasive nihilism that is present in our contemporary culture we came to the position where it will be possible to draw on the commonalities in their respective views. First of all, all four of these thinkers seem to agree that the only approach which is capable of transcending nihilism leads through the realization of the emptiness of the self. This view, in turn, demands to see reality as it is, beyond the false subject-object dichotomy. As Nishitani would stress, only by going through nihilism can one overcome it. Nishida and Nishitani both suggested a criterion with reference to attaining the objective of transcending the self-defeating self-centered vision of modernity that is virtually the same criterion that the aforementioned Japanese psychotherapists set as a goal. This criterion consists in allowing the self and other beings, via a transformative personal conversion, to become manifest in their "suchness" (*shinnyo*) so that the self could achieve an egoless tranquility from which it would become able to see its original connectedness to other beings. The ideal of the enlightened or selfless self looking at it from this revitalized Buddhist perspective is a self which is infinitely more embedded in the world than was ever before. The *arugamama* principle which demands the acceptance of things as they

⁴³ Ozawa de-Silva (2006).

are instead of fleeing into imaginary scenarios or focusing monomaniacally on the ego's petty concerns, is believed to be crucial for the individual's well-being (and also for the healthy functioning of society as a whole).

Standing on this rejuvenated standpoint of emptiness *qua* nothingness one does not purport to have buried once and for all the problem of nihilism or the quandary of the groundlessness that opens up underfoot whenever one sincerely examines one's rapidly dissolving existential bases. Perhaps the self-destructive and self-reorganizing traits of nihilism are vital components to its movement that is eternally vying with(in) itself. The human self that both causes the suffering and is subject to the suffering it causes may be better off if it were conceived as an entity that lacks a substantial core, devoid of an unchanging and indestructible center. Perhaps the self could be posited instead as a locus of emptiness wherein new values and new meanings are created spontaneously and automatically as soon as the self stops concentrating on itself and, as a prudent alternative, opens its eyes onto the vast universe that is always right there in front of its inquisitive nose.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Mellamphy (2011), pp. 114-115: "The question of 'subject-unity' must become the question of a sovereignty in which the 'head' is placed and displaced over and over again. The 'unity' of the subject is one in which the principle of sovereignty is equated with the capacity for ongoing spontaneous self-destruction qua self-organization (...) So while sovereignty itself is inviolable, it is so only because it is a multiplicity that reconfigures itself. As Nietzsche might say, it is nothing other than its activity of overcoming. Sovereignty is thus constituted as the ongoing capacity for individuation, rather than as the substance that makes up the constituted individual. The 'self' in other words is not individual, properly speaking, but radically over-individual. And within the context of the pathological condition of nihilism, the 'individuality' of the 'individual' cannot be given ontological priority over its characterization as 'over-individual'."

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[Essay]

If Goldfish Give Us Meaning in Life, What's Next?

A Critique of Susan Wolf's *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*

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Abstract

In her widely influential and popular book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Susan Wolf formulates a hybrid theory of our ability to have meaning in life. She originally argues, meaning in life arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way. I show that Wolf ends up crucially shifting her view from this original version to a revised version that she presents in her response to Nomy Arpaly and Johnathan Haidt's commentaries. Following this, I argue Wolf's account of meaning in life has very serious, possibly irrevocable, flaws because it structurally allows for a series of cases that are inconsistent with what she wishes to defend on the whole.

Introduction

Susan Wolf's hybrid theory of "meaning in life" as outlined in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* aims to combine elements from objective theories of meaning in life and subjective or attitude-dependent theories of meaning in life.¹ Objective theories see meaning in life as being grounded in the actions one performs or the activities one participates in that promote "the greater good." Subjective or attitude-dependent theories, on the other hand, see meaning in life as being grounded in the attitudes of satisfaction or fulfillment that one derives from activities they engage in or, more generally, their life at large. So understood, Wolf's hybrid theory combines elements from both objective and subjective theories to suggest that meaning in life is grounded in one's engagement with activities that are (i) subjectively satisfying and (ii) are objectively valuable in a positive way. On that note, this paper has two aims that will be divided correspondingly into two sections. In section one, I will focus on sketching a crucial shift in Wolf's hybrid theory that I believe she commits herself to in the

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¹ Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Subsequent references to this work in the text.

appendix of the book. Following this, in section two I will raise some objections to this revised version of the hybrid theory and conclude with some brief comments on the implications for Wolf's view.

1. A Change in View

In this section, I will attempt to draw an outline of the account of “meaning in life” that Susan Wolf gives in her lectures. I am going to show that Wolf ends up shifting her view from this original version to a revised version that she presents in her response to Nomy Arpaly and Johnathan Haidt's commentaries. First, however, a few preliminary remarks are in order. I want to set up the scene by calling attention to how Wolf begins by framing her view against the background of two long-standing philosophical models of rationality. According to the first model, people act rationally only insofar as their actions are grounded in their own self-interest. Conversely, the second model holds that people act rationally only insofar as they do what is best from a strictly moral perspective. By most standards, I think, these two models are quite popular, but Wolf contends that they alone are not enough to adequately describe human motivation and practical reason. In fact, she says they leave out many of the motives and reasons that are most important and central to our lives. Consider for example common cases such as when we visit a family member in the hospital or stay up all night working hard on a philosophy paper. Here, Wolf thinks, it would be mistaken to say that our actions are grounded in self-interest or moral reasons, because we are neither maximizing our own welfare by doing them, nor are we duty-bound to perform them.² Moreover, it seems odd to say that in such cases our behavior is unjustified in terms of our motives and practical reason. Thus, Wolf suggests that in these cases and others like them we act on reasons of love (i.e., acting for the sake of the loved person, object, or ideal, or simply because the actor loves what it is they are acting for), which correspondingly serve as an ingredient for meaning in one's life.

Still, Wolf makes it a point to show that not all cases where our actions are grounded in reasons of love does meaningfulness come to play a role, there are conditions that limit what contributes to meaning in one's life. According to her, “meaning arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a

² This isn't to suggest that moral reasons to perform a given action *only* amounts to whether or not there is a duty to do so.

positive way.”³ This characterization of Wolf’s view, however, is very not very detailed and overlooks some important aspects. With that being said, I want to try to formulate her view as follows:

Original version. A life with meaning in it is one that (i) subjects find fulfilling, (ii) contributes to or connects passionately with some person, object, or ideal, x , such that x has objective value (OV) outside of the subject, and (iii) that x is the thing that gives rise to the subject’s fulfillment.

Now, there is a lot to unpack here, so let’s begin. For one thing we have these vague notions of “fulfillment” and “objective value outside of the subject” present in our formulation of the Original version that need to be made clear. For Wolf, a subject’s fulfillment just is “the feelings one has when one loves, or when one is engaging in activities by which one is gripped or excited.”⁴ As for the second concern, the notion of a person, object, or ideal having objective value outside the subject is merely used by Wolf to avoid a radically subjective account of value. Otherwise, Wolf’s proposal is, as it stands, pretty straightforward and we need not spend too much time on it. I do wish to acknowledge that something seems right about the account justifying those common cases—like visiting a family member in the hospital or staying up all night to write a philosophy paper—in terms of practical reason.

Although it has this appealing consequence, the Original version isn’t very strong as it stands. Arpaly raises the worry that the Original version provides an objectionable result when given an easily imaginable case of a mentally disabled child that is positively engaged with caring for his pet goldfish and who finds the very activity to be fulfilling. As Wolf expresses throughout her lectures, she takes caring for a pet goldfish to be a paradigm instance of when an activity does not meet the conditions necessary to give rise to fulfillment.⁵ At least she thinks this is true for normal adults. However, according to Arpaly, “in caring for the fish, the child, unlike the adult, may well be working at the edge of his abilities, giving himself challenges and reasons to feel pride... a beloved goldfish or two can give

³ See note 1, p. 8.

⁴ See note 1, p. 14.

⁵ As Wolf’s own discussion renders clear, this is because she does not take caring for a pet goldfish as being an activity in which the subject contributes to or connects passionately with some person, object, or ideal, that has positive objective value.

the [mentally disabled] child a measure of fulfillment that would require much bigger projects in a normal adult...”⁶ Given this, if one embraces the Original version along with Wolf’s assumptions about the objective value in caring for a pet goldfish, then it must follow that the imagined mentally disabled child is not doing something which contributes to meaning in life. However, it seems clear from Wolf’s discussion following this objection that she feels this is an issue her account ought to accommodate.⁷ Following a worry of this sort, both Arpaly and Haidt suggest that the Original version is too restrictive in this way. For them, an account of meaning in life should focus on the subject’s fulfillment as meeting psychological needs and the exercise of human capacities, rather than place so much weight on the objective value of the person, object, or ideal that the subject engages with when determining meaning in one’s life.

Of course, I am certainly not the first to think Wolf shifts her view when she responds to these objections in the appendix of the book. Frances Kamm also notices this and says, “[Wolf] hypothesizes that [(i)] it is the exercise of whatever capacities one has to the highest extent and [(ii)] the opportunity this gives for interacting with others that may create objective value in that to which one is attracted.”⁸ At a minimum, (ii) seems right, however, I want to suggest that (i) is an incorrect interpretation of what Wolf says. In fact, she can even be found saying, “Haidt’s and Arpaly’s discussions of human psychology are insightful and instructive, with interesting implications, I believe for the [Original version]. Still, I believe there are reasons to resist using their insights to defend a fulfillment view of meaning that is independent to any reference of objective value.”⁹ This is to say, that she wants to hold on to (iii), or something like it, from the Original version despite what might seem like pressure for her to reconsider. In an attempt to offset all these worries, she gives, at least implicitly, a revised version that I will try to formulate as follows:

⁶ See note 1, p. 89.

⁷ “Although Haidt and Arpaly offered their examples (of the horse-loving student and goldfish-loving disabled child) as challenges to the idea that meaningfulness need be understood as essentially connected to objective value, I see their examples as offering hints about where the objective value might be found and how it can emerge. By understanding their examples in this way we can not only acknowledge the plausibility of their assessments, but explain what makes them so effective.” Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁸ Frances Kamm, *Almost Over*, (unpublished manuscript). From Ch. 6 of her forthcoming book on death, dying, and public policy.

⁹ See note 1, p. 120.

Revised version. A life with meaning in it is one that (i) subjects find fulfilling (ii) contributes to, or connects passionately with, some person, object, or ideal, x , such that x has objective value (OV) outside of the subject. (iii) Furthermore, there is a continuum of OV along which the OV of engaging with x can lie (e.g., building relationships, communion that comes from shared activity, cultivation and exercise of skills and virtues, etc.) and (iv) the whole or overall sum of those engagements the subject has, rather than x itself, is what gives rise to the fulfillment.

So, what has changed? Well, let me emphasize an important difference between the Original version and the Revised version. Because Wolf adopts a new notion of there being “a continuum of value” along which the value of engaging with a person, object, or ideal can lie, the Revised version can account for those problems raised by Arpaly and Haidt. Without pretending that I have fully captured what is meant by this, I wish to say more to ensure there is clarity here. One simple way put to it, is that, by “continuum of value” Wolf means the network of valuable activities around the person, object, or ideal that the subject engages with—call them “associated values,” if you will—and as I hinted above these include things like refinement of skills or friendships made through the subject’s engagement. So then, on the Revised version, if the mentally disabled child who finds fulfillment in caring for a goldfish is engaged with other children who come to see the fish and rapport is achieved with his parents who help him care for it, then even if those engagements are associated with what Wolf would have described as an activity that has no objective value (the caring for a goldfish) on the Original version, they are still valuable and give the child meaning in life.

In any case, it might be suggested that this shift is actually more problematic than helpful for Wolf’s account of “meaning in life,” and in the next section, I will discuss why I think this is so.

2. Problems with the Revised version and My Worries

As mentioned above and hinted at by the title of this section, I wish to discuss my worries that arise as a result of the shift to the Revised version and problems with Susan Wolf’s account of “meaning in life” as a whole. In what follows, I’ll largely be concerned with the question of what is allowed to count as giving

meaning to one's life as a consequence of this revision.

First, an important proviso: when looking at a theoretical level, the kind of objective value that some person, object, or ideal can have tends to be sorted into three general categories, that is, positive, negative, and neutral. As should have already been made clear by our discussion in section one, Wolf's account of "meaning in life" has always held that, other things considered, if the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has an objective value that is positive, then this gives the subject meaning in life.¹⁰ This changed with the shift to the Revised version, because now the account allows for the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged to have an objective value that is neutral (e.g., caring for a pet goldfish) or be what Wolf would more recently refer to as "good-for-nothing."¹¹ I am inclined to think, however, that even in these good-for-nothing cases such as caring for a pet goldfish, meaning in life is still determined, other things considered, by the positive objective value of those things within the network of valuable activities associated with the goldfish (e.g., the friendships made with the other children who come visit to see the goldfish).

If that analysis is right, namely, that on the Revised version engagement with good-for-nothings can give the subject meaning in life, albeit in a somewhat indirect way, and that process rests on the main contributors of meaning in life to be within the network of activities having positive objective value that are merely associated with the good-for-nothings, then I think this account begins to crumble. My point is that, in that case, the shift from the Original version to the Revised version just represents a shift from the subject previously having to be passionately connected with a person, object, or ideal that had *in itself* positive objective value in order to have meaning in life, to now, the subject only having to be passionately connected with associated values which have positive objective value. That is, so long as the whole or overall sum of the engagements the subject has (i.e. the objective value of the person, object, or ideal itself with which the subject is engaged plus the associated values) is positive, then the subject has

¹⁰ By "other things considered" I mean that given those subjective components (i.e., the subject being connected passionately with some person, object, or ideal they choose to engage with and find it fulfilling), we can speak of the objective component as being met in such a way. Further, I want to note that what I am saying here is, on the Original version, meaning in life is determined (other things considered) by the subject's engagement with some person, object, or ideal, that has positive objective value outside of the subject.

¹¹ Susan Wolf, "Good-for-Nothings" in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 85 (2010): pp. 47-64.

meaning in life.¹²

While this might not seem problematic when we're only dealing with a hypothetical mentally disabled child who finds fulfillment in caring for his goldfish, when we further consider the consequences of what has been said above, the account seems, at least to me, beyond repair. The idea, roughly, is that if the account permits the network of activities with positive objective value to be the sole contributor in the event of the subject's engagement with good-for-nothings, then it seems required to permit the network of activities with positive objective value to be the sole contributor in the event of the subject's engagement with what I will call *bad-for-someones*.¹³ More specifically, this will structurally allow for Nazis to be doing something that contributes to meaning in their lives when they help out with the Nazi bake sale to raise money for their annual vandalism night, because they'll be passionately connected to friendships and have shared communal activities (of which, generally on this view have positive objective value) along the way.¹⁴ Again, that is so long as the whole or overall sum of their engagements produce a positive objective value. Ultimately, this raises an interesting question: can an individual who is objectively bad have meaning in life? As I have expressed, it immediately seems that there is something disqualifying about objectively bad individuals having meaning in life, especially in an extreme counterexample like the one I just presented where the individuals are Nazis.¹⁵ However, I anticipate that insofar as one embraces Wolf's Revised version, there are two possible ways they might respond to this concern.

¹² It bears emphasizing that the model for representing evaluations of meaning in life on the Revised version assigns "parthood" relations to the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged and to each of things that make up the associated values. From this, it seems natural to elucidate the model using a framework of additivism or atomism to derive the sum of those values. At any rate, Wolf's shift in view now presents a picture where meaning in life is determined (other things considered) by a positive (in terms of value) sum of those things holding a parthood relation. (Sill it's difficult to assert what exactly the parthood relation is in relation to, for our purposes let's just call it x, and what exactly is a "part," or can be a "part" of, x. Nevertheless, this need not concern us in advancing the discussion). For more see Campbell Brown, "Two Kinds of Holism About Values" in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57 (2007): pp. 456-463.

¹³ By "bad-for-someones" I mean to refer to those cases where the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has an objective value that is negative (e.g., what most of the middle ages consisted of in Europe).

¹⁴ Please do not take me to be saying the Nazi's communal activities has positive objective value. All I meant here was that the general events of building friendships and shared communal activities have positive objective value. Also, I will later reference this imagined scenario as the Nazi bake sale example.

¹⁵ Perhaps it's worth addressing the objection that some readers make at this point. That is, any person, object, or ideal related to Nazism has an objective value so negative that realistically, no amount of objectively positive associated values could ever make the whole or overall sum of the subject's engagements produce a positive objective value (see Landau, 2011; Campbell & Nyholm, 2015). Even

First, defenders of the Revised version might try to retreat by claiming it's fallacious to assume the governing function of the account is based on an *atomistic model of value holism*—i.e., representing (for our purposes) evaluations of meaning in life by the sum of *independent* values without factoring in considerations for “interaction effects.”¹⁶ That is when combined, those associated positive objective values offered in the above scenario with the Nazis actually contribute, all things considered, to the *overall disvalue* or badness of the case. In fact, I quite agree with those defenders that it may be, crudely put, “bad philosophy” to hastily make assumptions about what model the governing function of any account is based on. But, as far as I can see, their complaint has little force and will not provide them with the resources to avoid Wolf's account from crumbling. After all, if one decides to pursue this anticipated retreat it remains necessary for them to reconfigure the Revised version with an alternative model that represents evaluations of whole values in terms of the composition of their part values. But my sense is that, even if this is accomplished, various unaddressed concerns still interfere with the Revised version being a philosophically satisfying account of meaning in life.

For one thing, suppose we stipulate that the Revised version's governing function is based on a sort of value holism supported by G.E. Moore or Jonathan Dancy where the contextual value of parts plays a critical role in representing evaluations of whole values. In this way, the Revised version would be able to offer a satisfying response to the Nazi counterexample, namely, that those associated positive objective values actually contribute, all things considered, to the overall disvalue or badness of the case. Call this the Revised version*. But, as

if that is so, I feel there are other less-extreme cases, one of which I will soon offer, where we could reasonably conceive of the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged having a negative objective value that, when conjoined with objectively positive associated values, could allow for the whole or overall sum of the subject's engagements to produce a positive objective value.

¹⁶ To illustrate this point, consider the following example offered by Campbell Brown: “As the opinions of competent judges will attest, gravy complements chips, yet spoils ice-cream. That is, chips with gravy is better than chips alone, but ice-cream with gravy is worse than ice-cream alone. On an ‘atomistic’ view of value, these judgements are puzzling. The sole difference between chips with gravy and chips alone is the gravy. So any difference in value between these two must be the value of the gravy. But just the same is true of ice-cream with gravy and ice-cream alone: the only difference is the gravy, and so any difference in value must be the value of the gravy. The difference in value between the first pair is, therefore, the same as that between the second pair. In particular, chips with gravy is better than chips alone if and only if ice-cream with gravy is better than ice-cream alone.” Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 1. In short, the response from loyal advocates of Wolf's Revised version can be seen as claiming that the Nazi bake sale objection I raised doesn't take into consideration that there might be an “interaction effect” between values as there is with ice-cream and gravy.

I hinted at before, the Nazi bake sale case is an extreme counterexample and of course there are other less-extreme cases. For example, suppose there's a farmer who spends his entire adult life slaughtering cattle. (For our purposes and because it's a matter of huge debate, let's say that slaughtering cattle is a type of harm and hence a bad-for-someone case).¹⁷ Suppose that the farmer does this in order to provide food for his family and that he also donates the additional meat to those in need during the holidays making him a valued and respected member of his community.¹⁸ Intuitively, this might appear to be a bad-for-someone with a significant amount of associated objectively positive goods that *should* contribute to meaning in the individual's life, however, I think we ought to reject this inference or at least be very suspicious of it. Right off the bat, it appears unclear how the Revised version* would, all things considered, represent an evaluation of meaning in life for the cattle farmer—do the associated positive objective values here also contribute to the overall badness of the case? Based on what Wolf has said in the past about *moral saints*¹⁹, it may be that in this particular scenario she does not see the contribution from the negative elements in the cattle farmer's engagement as being a matter of concern for meaning in life.²⁰ Notice, however, that this would mark a significant departure from what she originally wished to claim in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, namely, that “an individual cannot get meaning from worthless projects, much less from projects of wholly negative

¹⁷ I suppose on the traditional use of the word a cow isn't a “someone.” In that event, one could refer to these this case as a *bad-for-some-being* case. See Harman, 2011; 2015, for debate on whether on not killing animals for farming practices constitutes a harm.

¹⁸ This example came from Danny Underwood in comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Additionally, John Partridge brought to my attention a possible real-life instance of the cattle farmer example. Dario Cecchini, a world-renowned Italian butcher from the Chianti region of Italy, was previously on a path to become a Veterinarian before he left university to take over the family business from his dying father. In doing so, he became the eighth generation of Cecchini butchers. Now, I'm not sure Cecchini donates leftover meat to those in need during the holidays the above example describes, but he is certainly a well-respected member of his community and, for that matter, the more global cooking community. His mission is to protect and advocate for the local butcher against the rise of powerful supermarkets and moreover, serve as a teacher and educator. These could considerably be associated positive objective values.

¹⁹ Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints” in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79 (1982): pp. 419-439.

²⁰ Frances Kamm pointed out to me that the cattle farmer case might be particularly interesting here since it seems to be a case of compensation. That is, by donating his spare product to the needy and serving as a valued and respected member of his community, the cattle farmer is attempting to compensate for his engagement in an immoral activity. Perhaps that's why it intuitively seems as if this is a bad-for-someone with a significant amount of associated objectively positive goods that should (or at least could) contribute to meaning in life. At any rate, another question that might be worth asking is how something like compensation, sacrifice, or other contexts weigh on the all things considered value of an immoral action, activity, or what have you.

value.”²¹ At the very least, it seems evident that the cattle farmer scenario raises concerns that require further consideration.

The second way I anticipate defenders of the Revised version (and also Revised version*) might respond to the issues that arise from the Nazi bake sale case (and the cattle farmer scenario just outlined) is by positing *anti-meaning* as part of the model’s conceptual framework. That is, one could suggest that meaningfulness is not monopolar and in fact has a negative pole that represents adding something of distinctly negative value to one’s life. In this way, Nazi bake sale people would be engaged in an activity that substantially weighs against whatever contributions to meaning in life they might have had from the positive associated values. Although this accounts for the Nazi bake sale case, I find this response to face the same issue as the first response. More specifically, it still remains unclear how the account would represent an all things considered evaluation of meaning in life for the cattle farmer—is he engaged in an activity that, like the Nazi bake sale people, substantially weighs against the contributions to meaning in life that stem from the positive associated values? As before, the cattle farmer case intuitively appears to be a bad-for-someone with a significant amount of associated objectively positive goods that should (or at least could) contribute to meaning in life. But, as before too, if the contribution from the associated values can offset the anti-meaning that stems from the negative elements in the in the cattle farmer’s engagement, then there clearly has been a departure from what Wolf says about “projects of wholly negative value.”

Assuming that there is a solution to the foregoing concerns I have raised, the Revised version* stands to completely fly in the face of what Wolf seems to say, at least implicitly, about what I will refer to as *Gauguin cases*.²² These are scenarios where an individual contributes to, or connects passionately with, some person, object, or ideal, that has positive objective value outside of the subject, but meanwhile, also is engaged with a network of associated activities that have negative objective value. Wolf makes it clear when discussing the scorned artist and lonely inventor on the Original version that it’s not a necessary condition for there to be a network of associated values in order for the subject to attain meaning in life. Against this background, when analyzing Gauguin cases on the Original

²¹ See note 1, p. 60

²² So called because of Bernard Williams’ discussion of Gauguin in his essay on moral luck. As the story goes, Gauguin abandoned his family in Denmark and isolated himself to pursue art in Paris, hence, he aptly represents an individual in the kind of scenario I want to draw on here.

version Wolf would have considered an individual—one such as Paul Gauguin—to have meaning in life. However, given the above discussion of the shift in her view to the Revised version and the anticipated responses to the Nazi bake sale counterexample that brings to attention the Revised version*, analyzing Gauguin cases in the same way as before becomes extremely problematic. To reinforce this picture, reflect on how a value holism that takes into account the contextual value of parts in the evaluations of whole values—a G.E. Moore and/or Jonathan Dancy value holism—would parse these Gauguin cases. According to this way of theorizing, the model would likely represent an evaluation of a “Gauguin scenario” as a negative whole value, since considerably, it’s just the reverse of the aforementioned Nazi bake sale example. By this, I mean to point out that, in the latter, the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has a negative objective value and the associated values are positive, while in the former, the person, object, or ideal with which the subject is engaged has a positive objective value and the associated values are negative. So understood, they are switched. But, unlike the Nazi bake sale example, Wolf previously seemed committed to the idea that an individual like Gauguin would be making a contribution to meaning in their life.

Summing up, if some of what I have argued turns out to not to hit the mark, it nevertheless seems evident that Wolf or her supporters need to address the concerns I’ve presented in order for the revised hybrid theory to be a philosophically satisfying account of meaning in life. On the other hand, if what I have argued hitherto does hit the mark, then Wolf’s account has very serious, possibly irrevocable, flaws. To say more about why I consider these to be “possibly irrevocable flaws,” recall from our earlier discussion that the shift from the Original version to the Revised version required a reconfiguration of the hybrid theory such that it included a model for representing evaluations of whole values in terms of the composition of their part values. Through that process, the worries against atomism in the form of the Nazi bake sale case led us to invoke value holism in the Revised version*, but, as I see it, this won’t suffice for a theory of meaning in life.

The first point to note is that having meaning in life is generally seen as something that (all else being equal) makes one better-off and renders their life more desirable to have. To put it another way, meaning in life is generally seen as

a *prudential good*.²³ Given that, ideally a theory of meaning in life will be able to inform our decision making, that is, insofar as we wish to make ourselves better-off. In order to do this, a theory needs to be able to provide consistent evaluations in the form of meaning in life judgments. Drawing a connection to the examples presented earlier, that means a theory needs to be able to provide a single meaning in life judgement for each of the individuals in the above cases, more specifically, the goldfish owner, the Nazi bake sale people, the cattle farmer, and Paul Gauguin. As it turns out, both the Revised version and Revised version* won't meet this criteria. On both of those versions, the objective value of an individual's engagement with some person, object, or ideal, *x*, considered as a whole depends on the values of its parts, namely, the objective value of *x* and the associated values, which allows for multiple meaning in life judgements to be available for cases like the cattle farmer and Paul Gauguin. That is to say, in both of those examples, a story where the sum of the parts forms a whole with positive objective value can just as easily be told as a story where the sum of the parts forms a whole with negative objective value.²⁴ At any rate, the bottom line is this: a theory of meaning in life that provides contradictory evaluations based on the same case information is not a philosophically satisfying theory and can't inform our decision making as it relates to achieving meaning in life or making our lives prudentially more valuable.

As for what an alternative account might look like in that case, I am still unsure. Rather, this paper has more so aimed to illuminate a negative result of not only Wolf's Revised version/Revised version* but also her account of "meaning in life" as a whole.²⁵

²³ See Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Nyholm, 2015; Metz, 2013. Using different terms, Metz suggests that meaningfulness is what Tim Scanlon would call a *personal good*—i.e., "[a] condition that makes and individual person's existence better or worse and so...in a broad sense 'good for' one (cf. p. 62)."

²⁴ With respect to Paul Gauguin on the Revised version*, one could plausibly say that while there is some negative OV from the associated values, there is much more positive OV from the art that he is engaged in and, moreover, no noteworthy interaction effects between the art and the negative associated values. As a result, this makes the sum of those values positive. Therefore, Gauguin has meaning in life. But, one could also just as plausibly say the reverse, namely, that while there is so much positive OV from the art he is engaged with, there is also a smaller but still sufficient amount of negative OV from the associated values to result in interaction effects that make the sum of those values negative. Therefore, Gauguin doesn't have meaning in life. Suffice to say, both judgements about Gauguin can be given on the Revised version* despite being based on the same case information.

²⁵ Previous versions of this paper were presented at The College of William & Mary, the Rutgers Undergraduate Philosophy Reading Group, and Waseda University. I would like to thank the audiences of each for their input, especially John Partridge, Thaddeus Metz, Philip Swenson, and Frank Wu. I am most grateful to Frances Kamm, Danny Underwood, Frank Wu, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts, which resulted in many adjustments to the paper.

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