

[Essay]

## Review of Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life*

Minao Kukita\*

### Abstract

In this review, we examine Thaddeus Metz's theory of meaning in life proposed in *Meaning in Life*. After providing an overview of the book, we critically assess how successful his theory is. In specific, we argue that the key concept of fundamentality does not work as well as Metz claims it. Either the concept is not free from arbitrariness or ambiguity, or Metz is wrong in claiming that fundamentality is essential for a work of art to confer meaning to the artist's life. Finally, we raise some questions about basic intuitions and assumptions in Metz's theory.

In this book, based on thorough research and analysis of a large amount of literature written mostly by Anglo-American analytic philosophers on meaning in life, Metz attempts to construct a theory of life's meaning that can account for many different opinions and theories expressed by influential writers in recent decades. While doing this, first, Metz studies existing influential theories and classifies them into several categories. Furthermore, he carefully and critically examines each theory and reveals the key intuitions that operate behind people's judgements about whether a person's life is meaningful or how meaningful it is. Most of all, this book provides an excellent survey; it is an informative guideline for anyone who wishes to contribute to the field of meaning in life.

After surveying existing theories, Metz further proposes his own principles to distinguish what Anglo-American analytic philosophers have considered to be meaningful lives and what they have not. Accordingly, the argument here primarily depends on what philosophers in this community have thought and said and the 'intuitions' lying behind them. The significance of Metz's theory depends on how well it deals with such intuitions. Most of what is proposed here may seem implausible to those who do not share judgements regarding the meaningfulness of individual lives and who do not share intuitions concerning life's meaning. Indeed, I will propose some questions concerning basic intuitions

---

\* Associate Professor, Graduate School of Information Science, Nagoya University, Furo-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, 464-8601 Japan. Email: minao.kukita[a]is.nagoya-u.ac.jp

and assumptions made by Metz later in this review. Thus, despite a title that attracts the attention of a wide range of readers, the theory proposed in the book is only intended for a very limited group of readers. Nevertheless, it will be instructive and interesting for any philosophers outside the analytic tradition and Anglo-American culture to learn what Anglo-American analytic philosophers have thought and said on the subject and in what manner they have done so.

The main question Metz struggles to answer in the book is as follows: ‘What features of one’s life make it (more/less) meaningful?’ In Chapter 2, he clarifies this question by explicating the concept of ‘meaning in life’. He considers the question regarding what constitutes ‘meaning in life’ as a cluster of the following three questions that overlap or share a ‘family resemblance’:

- What purpose is most worth pursuing?
- How should one transcend one’s animal nature?
- What is a life worthy of pride and admiration?

Metz argues that each one of these by itself fails to capture the concept of life’s meaning; however, together they do capture it. Based on this concept, Metz assesses existing theories of what makes life meaningful (Chapters 5–11) and then, constructs his own theory (Chapter 12).

In Chapter 3, Metz argues that both the part-life and whole-life perspectives are relevant for life’s meaning and that meaning can be dealt with in ‘pro tanto’ terms—‘How much meaning does this life have?’—and in ‘on balance’ terms—‘Everything considered, is this life meaningful?’ In Chapter 4, it is argued that meaning in life is a final good that differs from pleasure as such. As a pleasant life can be identified with a happy life, happiness and meaning are shown to be two different fundamental values.

Chapters 5–11 examine existing mainstream theories that Metz classifies into the following three categories: supernaturalism, subjectivism and objectivism. Metz regards each as insufficient; however, he thinks that the intuitions underlying them ought to be saved (as data to be explained). Further, he begins Chapter 12 by laying down nine desiderata, derived from an examination of existing theories that any satisfactory theory of meaning in life should explain.

Then, Metz proposes his own principles for these desiderata. The principle from the *pro tanto* perspective for part-life meaning is as follows:

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence. (p. 233.)

Furthermore, Metz proposes the principle from the *pro tanto* perspective for whole-life meaning and argues that these principles satisfy all the desiderata mentioned above and that typical meaning conferrers such as moral achievement, discovery of truth and creation of beautiful works indeed add to meaning according to these principles. In addition, Metz formulates how the total amount of meaning in life is calculated based on the above principle and, using that formula, proposes the principle that determines the meaningfulness of one's life on balance.

Metz calls 'fundamentality theory' the theory constituted by these principles. While he admits that the theory is not complete and that there are cases it is unable to deal with well, he concludes that it is the best among mainstream theories proposed so far.

The advantage he attributes to his theory is its explanatory power: it can account for the apparent kernels of truth in many of the major theories proposed so far and the intuitions underlying them. Metz tries to achieve this goal by abstracting common features shared with many theories and by complementing conditions for intuitions that are not included in the abstraction. This is why Metz's theory is abstract, complicated and long.

If a theory has epistemic merits by including different existing theories, it is because it deals with more phenomena with fewer principles. If a new theory is constituted by principles already realised, that is, if it merely packs old theories into one package, it is not so great an innovation. References to reason, moral constraints or life story and the distinction between the part-life and the whole-life perspectives seem not to be so great an advantage of Metz's theory. This is because Metz only puts together elements of existing theories into one long statement, though I appreciate his efforts in reading a great deal of literature on the subject and extracting important features. In contrast, according

to Metz, no one has incorporated the ‘Negative Condition’ (namely, that some conditions can reduce meaning in life) into their theory. Therefore, this is an original contribution. However, the fact that no one has ever tried to do so may indicate the possibility that it is Metz alone who has this intuition and that other philosophers in the field may regard this desideratum as irrelevant, rather than as a datum to be explained.

What seems to be the greatest merit of Metz’s theory is his general characterisation of meaning-conferring objects as ‘fundamental conditions of human existence’. According to Metz, this generalisation enables us to explain how moral achievement, discovery of important truths and creation of beautiful works of art—typical exemplars of what makes a life meaningful—confer meaning on one’s life and to distinguish meaningfulness from mere pleasure or happiness as such. However, this generalisation seems to me to be too general and abstract. The fundamental conditions of human existence are defined as those conditions that are largely responsible for many other human conditions. Metz claims that this concept is relatively free from ambiguity; however, I am still unsure what this concept means. For example, in explaining how his principles work in the case of the creation of works of art, Metz says that for an artwork to be great, i.e. to confer substantial meaning on the artist’s life, it should deal with what is not only universal but also fundamental and that morality, death, war, love and family are fundamental while excreting and dust are not, though they are universal. This distinction seems to me not only quite arbitrary, but also simply wrong. For example, the most famous and popular work of haiku (a form of traditional Japanese poetry consisting of seventeen syllables) is simply about the sound of a frog jumping into a pond (‘An old pond, the sound of a frog jumping into it’). The author, Basho Matsuo, also wrote a piece of haiku about the urine of a horse (‘Fleas, lice, a horse urinating near my pillow’). According to Metz, these haiku are not about fundamental conditions of human existence, and therefore, do not pass as great art. If Metz is not insolent enough to dismiss these examples as not being instances of great art, he will have to admit either: (1) that these haiku are about certain fundamental conditions of human existence, or (2) that great art is not necessarily about certain fundamental conditions of human existence. If he chooses (1) he will also have to admit that fundamentality is more arbitrary and ambiguous than he thought. However, taking path (2) will reveal a serious defect in his theory because it implies that the theory cannot account for the intuition that creating a

beautiful work of art makes one's life more meaningful.

One possible response to this objection is to recall what Metz says about non-representational artworks (minimalist paintings or music, for example). He suggests the possibility that such artworks are about themselves *qua* artworks, about some abstract patterns, or in fact about fundamental and pressing aspects of human existence such as death and fate (p. 231). An obvious difficulty here is that the above-mentioned haiku are apparently representational and about nothing other than an old pond, a frog, flea, lice and a horse urinating. To interpret them, contrary to appearances, as not representational or not about these things needs special justification. I am afraid that there are many other artworks that are apparently about unimportant things but that are nonetheless viewed as great art. Each of these cases will call for a separate justification if you wish to interpret them as not representational or not about things they appear to be about. This will somehow reduce the explanatory power of fundamentality theory as a general theory.

The abovementioned constitutes an overview of Metz's book. Reading this book, I found myself with radically different basic intuitions and assumptions, such that I disagree with Metz almost everywhere throughout the book. I will spend a few words describing these disagreements. The following remarks are by a reader for whom the author did not intend the book. Thus, if you follow the Anglo-American analytic tradition and find no difficulty in the basic intuitions and assumptions on which it is constructed, you may skip the following and finish reading this review. However, if you are interested in what people from another culture think about meaning in life, please go on to read the rest.

The most fundamental difference between Metz and myself does not comprise individual judgements about whether a given person's life is meaningful or not, but in the assumption that you can divide people's lives into a meaningful group and a meaningless group by some objective measure (though Metz usually seems more interested in specific aspects of a life, namely, *pro tanto* meaning). I will protest against anyone other than myself evaluating my life as meaningful or not meaningful by any measure. I want no one to judge my life to be meaningless. Nor would I judge any other person's life to be meaningless, or arrange other people's lives in order of how meaningful they are. Since I cannot share the assumption that one can compare meaningfulness across people's lives by some objective measure, I cannot appreciate what Metz attempts to achieve in his book.

Metz might object to my argument by claiming that it is not a matter of liking or disliking, or of being right or wrong. It is a matter of fact whether someone's life is meaningful or not, or whether someone's life is more meaningful than another's, because meaning in life is, according to Metz, a real object that is independent of our perception of it. A meaningful life is a category comparable to that of water defined to be the chemical compound H<sub>2</sub>O. No matter how strongly I protest to the judgement that I am living a meaningless life, it is an unshakable fact. The naturalist realism of Metz, however, has no ground. At least, he has not yet shown us anything resembling evidence that supports it. It is dubious that the concepts he appeals to in building his criteria for meaningfulness, e.g. intelligence, reason, morality and so on, are natural kinds in the same sense that water is defined as H<sub>2</sub>O. Moreover, in clarifying the concept of life's meaning, he appeals to 'family resemblance', an instrument that is useless for rigorous classification, though convenient in that it can be used in an *ad hoc* and arbitrary way. To claim naturalist realism about meaning in life based on such an unstable foundation seems too hasty and dogmatic.

Metz's naturalist realism may be due to analytic philosophers' common aspiration to engage in philosophy in a scientific fashion. From the beginning, analytic philosophers have thought much of rigour and clarity in order for philosophy to qualify as part of science. Thus, some early analytic philosophers intentionally tried to distance themselves from metaphysical, value-relating or religious issues that seemed difficult to handle with scientific rigour and clarity (whether they in fact succeeded or not is another question). Over the century, analytic philosophers have established methods and styles for rigorous argumentation and have come to increasingly think highly of outcomes of natural science. Naturalism now seems to have become their default method; unless done in a naturalist fashion, it is not worth doing. With this default naturalist attitude, analytic philosophers have somehow returned to the subjects and questions their ancestors tried to avoid; however, this time armed with rigorous methods and styles their great ancestors have invented. Hence, there have emerged the fields of analytic metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, theology and, finally, existentialism.

However, there is a problem here. Methods and styles for argumentation alone do not make a doctrine scientific. Any scientific research must be supplied with observable, objective and reproducible data. However, we have no such data about, for example, necessity, morality, beauty, deity, meaning in life and so

on, except for people's expressed opinions about them. So, in dealing with these matters, analytic philosophers have heavily depended on their intuitions in the place of the more solid evidence used in natural science. However, if the data are not subject to scientific tests, the theory should not be called scientific.

Clear arguments by analytic philosophers are valuable in that they reveal what intuitions underlie our discourse about these matters, which assumptions are shared and which are not, exactly where our conflicts come from and so on. Knowing them will help us to better understand, evaluate and appreciate what other people think and say and establish a common ground. Specifically in this sense, Metz's work is valuable for those interested in the subject of meaning in life. However, we cannot ultimately justify our intuitions about these matters, nor can we ultimately falsify others', at least until advances in science bring new evidence that will explain the matter. A problem I found in Metz's exposition is that he marginalises the intuitions of those who disagree with him or his analytic friends with little justification when there is no evidence supporting the order of superiority among contradicting intuitions. If he is to really be a naturalist—though I do not think an analytic philosopher should always be one—he should examine his intuitions using scientific means (statistic or neurological) instead of merely favouring his analytic circle.