

RECONSIDERING MEANING IN LIFE

A Philosophical Dialogue with
Thaddeus Metz

Edited by
Masahiro Morioka

Journal of Philosophy of Life



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Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers and essays published in the Special Issue “Reconsidering Meaning in Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with Thaddeus Metz,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.5, No.3, 2015.

“Meaning in life” or the “meaning of life” is one of the most discussed topics in the field of philosophy of life. The *Journal of Philosophy of Life* has so far published several papers which deal with the issue of “meaning in life” as their main subject. Looking back in history, philosophers, religious figures, and novelists in every part of the world have discussed this topic ardently and passionately from ancient times to the present day. More recently, philosophers in the English speaking world have begun to study this topic in the field of analytic philosophy.

In 2013, philosopher Thaddeus Metz published a monumental book entitled *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* with Oxford University Press. Fortunately, Professor Metz has been a member of the editorial advisory board of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* from its inception. I asked him to be a guest editor of a special issue dedicated to his book. We called for papers in the summer of 2014, and in October this year, we published eleven peer-reviewed articles and two essays in the *Journal*. You can read all of them and a reply by Metz in this single book.

While the main purpose of the papers is to analyze and criticize arguments made by Thaddeus Metz, from their discussions we can extract fruitful insights and suggestions for further development of the philosophical analysis of meaning in life in general. I believe this volume provides new and fresh approaches to the study of meaning in life in a diversified world.

Masahiro Morioka

Professor, Waseda University

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

October 31, 2015.

Précis of *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*

Thaddeus Metz

Distinguished Research Professor, University of Johannesburg

In *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Metz 2013), my overarching aims are to articulate a novel theory of what would make a human person's life meaningful and to argue that it is more justified than competitors to be found in the analytic philosophical literature from the past 100 or so years.

This project inherently brings with it certain limitations. In focusing on the meaning of an *individual's* life, I set aside the issue of what, if anything, might confer meaning on the human race in general. In evaluating *theories* of meaning in a person's life, I address fundamental principles that purportedly capture what all meaningful conditions have in common, and so do not explore particularist, phenomenological, strictly first-personal or other philosophical approaches that one might adopt. In considering principally *analytic* texts, i.e., those in the English-speaking, Anglo-American philosophical tradition, I do not thoroughly discuss those in other traditions such as the Continental or East Asian. Finally, in reflecting mainly on *philosophical* works, I bracket considerations of how research in other fields such as psychology or religion might be revealing.

Given such a focus, I found more than enough authors, works and ideas with which to grapple in *Meaning in Life*. About half of the contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* have elected to stay within the parameters of my project; they use the same sort of lens that I employ, but see something different from what I do. Here I am thinking of the articles by Peter Baumann, David Matheson, Jason Poettcker, Yu Urata, Hasko von Kriegstein, Nicholas Waghorn, Mark Wells and Fumitake Yoshizawa.

However, one major rationale for this special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* was to encourage the reflective exploration of issues of meaning through a different lens altogether. Such an approach characterizes the contributions of Christopher Ketcham, Minao Kukita, Masahiro Morioka, James Tartaglia and Sho Yamaguchi, all of whom, except for Tartaglia, work within the East Asian philosophical tradition.

Usually these latter critics maintain not merely that their lens is different and merits use alongside mine, but also that it is better and should be used instead of it. In my reply to these contributors, I argue that this stronger view is implausible, and that, at best, they offer a lens that would usefully supplement, but that should not supplant, the one that I employ. I do not defend the claim that would be the mirror image of the one these critics make, viz., that only my, theoretical-analytic way of approaching issues of meaning is appropriate. At this stage of my thought, I am pluralist about methodology, maintaining that it would be useful to view meaning through a variety of lenses.

* * *

In the rest of this overview, I provide a sketch of the three major parts of *Meaning in Life*, reviewing just enough to make sense of the rich debates that follow. This special issue of the *Journal* has advanced reflection about meaning, and done so in some truly deep and interesting ways. I am honoured and heartened that my book was the occasion for such additions to the stock of knowledge.

In the first major part of *Meaning in Life* I analyze the category of meaningfulness in a way that is intended to be largely neutral amongst competing theories of what meaningfulness essentially is insofar as it is exhibited to a certain degree in a human person's life. Specifically, I define what most in Anglo-American philosophy mean by the phrase "meaning in life" and cognate terms, indicate what the bearer of this value is, and differentiate meaningfulness from happiness, subjectively construed.

With regard to definitional matters, I ultimately maintain that a pluralist, family resemblance model is most defensible at this point. According to this view, talk of "meaning in life" is about ideas such as purposiveness, transcendence, aptness of emotions such as admiration and esteem, and narrative properties. While each of these ideas captures a large array of theoretical work in the relevant literature, no one of them captures everything on its own.

I next consider what the bearer of life's meaning is, i.e., what it is about a life that can be meaningful or meaningless. Is it only the life as a patterned whole, merely the parts of a life considered in themselves, or

both? I conclude in favour of the latter, mixed view; I maintain that there are two independent dimensions of meaning in life, namely, certain parts of a person's life at a certain time, such as a particular action, project or stage (e.g., adolescence) and then also the person's life considered in its entirety. A complete judgment of the degree of meaning in a person's life, which would ground a comparison with the lives of others, must weigh up both dimensions and add them together in some way.

In the rest of part one, I compare and contrast the goods of pleasure and meaning, focusing most on highlighting important differences between them. I contrast pleasure and meaning with respect to six value-theoretic factors, amongst them: what the logical sources of these values are in contrast to their bearers, how luck can play a role in their realization of the values, and which attitudes are appropriate in response to them. I conclude by suggesting that a pleasant life is plausibly to be identified with a happy one, which means that happiness and meaningfulness are two distinct goods that can each contribute independently to making a life choice-worthy.

In the next two major parts of the book, I focus on spelling out and evaluating a wide array of theories of life's meaning, basic accounts of what all the meaningful conditions of a life have in common. I assess theories largely in terms of the extent to which they entail and plausibly explain intuitions salient in the Anglo-American philosophical literature, particularly as they concern the meaningfulness of the good (morality, beneficence), the true (knowledge, wisdom) and the beautiful (art, creativity).

Specifically, in the second part, I criticize supernaturalist theories of meaning in life, according to which either God or a soul (or both), as typically conceived in the monotheist tradition, is necessary for life to be at all meaningful. I spend considerable time focusing on the most influential version of supernaturalism, according to which meaning in a person's life consists of her fulfilling God's purpose.

I provide reasons to doubt arguments in favour of purpose theory, and also claim to offer a novel reason to doubt the view itself. According to this latter argument, in order for God to be necessary to confer meaning on our lives, God would have to be qualitatively different from, and higher than, anything that could exist in the natural world. And this means that God

would have to be a person who has properties such as simplicity and atemporality, properties that are difficult to reconcile with purposive agency, which appears to be essentially complex and temporal.

I also proffer arguments against any supernaturalism, not just the purposive version of it. The most original objection is that many of those who adopt supernaturalism hold views that are in tension with each other. On the one hand, they claim to know that some lives have meaning in them, but, on the other, they do not claim to know that anything supernatural, such as God or a soul, actually exists. Supernaturalists might have faith in the latter, but that is of course not conclusive evidence of their existence, which most implicitly maintain they have about the presence of meaning in people's lives.

In the third part of *Meaning in Life*, I present a new naturalist theory that I contend improves upon extant versions of naturalism, the broad view that a life in a purely physical world could be meaningful. I first provide counterexamples to a wide range of existing naturalist views, including the theories that a life is meaningful just insofar as it is creative, promotes welfarist or perfectionist consequences in the long run, or connects with organic unities beyond itself.

I then advance my favoured view at this stage, the fundamentality theory, which is roughly the idea that a life is (particularly) meaningful insofar as exercises reason in a robust, sophisticated way and orients it towards basic conditions of human existence, ones that are largely responsible for or explain much else about it.

Just as H₂O is fundamental to water, and being a CEO is fundamental to the operations of a firm (on which see Metz 2015), so there are certain properties of human life that are fundamental to (i.e., roughly, account for much of) various dimensions of it. For example, space-time, gravity and light are fundamental to the environment in which human beings live; communication, socialization and labour are fundamental to the development of the human species; practical reasoning and community are fundamental to the course of a human society; and character is fundamental to the way a particular one of us lives (an additional dimension that I did not discuss in the book, but see Metz 2014).

By my theory, great meaning in a life comes from using rationality to positively engage with these kinds of “deep” facets of human life.

Sometimes that is a matter of discovering or learning what they are; other times it is a matter of protecting them; and still other times it is a matter of expressing respect for or appreciation of them.

I do not claim that the fundamentality theory is perfect, as it stands. However, I continue to be inclined to think that it is the best springboard for future reflection. It, better than existing rivals in the literature, captures intuitions about the good, the true and the beautiful as central to meaning, intuitions that are salient in the Anglo-American philosophical literature, which I have principally addressed so far.

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Source and Bearer

Metz on the Pure Part-Life View of Meaning

Hasko von Kriegstein*

Abstract

According to the *pure part-life view* the meaning in our lives is always borne by particular parts of our lives. The aim of this paper is to show that Thaddeus Metz's rejection of this view is too quick. Given that meaning is a value that often depends on relational rather than intrinsic properties a pure part-life view can accommodate many of the intuitions that move Metz towards a *mixed view*. According to this mixed view some meaning is borne by parts of our lives and some by our lives as a whole. The arguments in this paper suggest, however, that even if a pure part-life view is to be rejected, a mixed view that incorporates a whole-life aspect is not going to be any more plausible.

1. Introduction

Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* is a magisterial treatment of this important topic as it is discussed in contemporary analytic philosophy. Early on in the book Metz discusses whether the bearers of meaning are whole lives, parts of lives, or both.¹ He argues for the last of these options rejecting the pure whole-life view, and the pure part-life view in order. Having done so he briefly raises some puzzles regarding the whole-life aspect of his mixed view without fully resolving them. In closing his discussion of the bearers of meaning Metz cautions the reader that, in keeping with the majority of the literature, he will focus on part-life aspects and largely set aside issues regarding meaning borne by whole lives.² Thus, by his own lights, Metz's book is somewhat incomplete: it fails to engage thoroughly with one way in which our lives can bear meaning.

In this short article I suggest that this incompleteness is merely apparent. I argue that Metz's rejection of the pure part-life view is too quick and that pure part-lifers can accommodate the intuitions that drive Metz to adopt his mixed view. Moreover, insofar as a pure part-life view has trouble accommodating these ideas adding a whole-life aspect does not help. I suggest that a properly

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¹ Cf. Metz (2014), Chapter 3.

² Metz (2014), 58.

developed pure part-life view is less vulnerable to the problems that Metz raises for the whole-life aspects of his view. Thus, while I reject Metz's mixed view on the bearers of meaning, my proposal would strengthen his overall project. Some of the loose ends he leaves become easier to tie up, and his almost exclusive focus on the way in which the parts of a life can contribute to its meaning is fully justified; for there is nothing else to discuss.

The paper proceeds as follows. I begin with a brief summary of Metz's discussion of the bearers of meaning (section 2). Next, I draw attention to resources at the disposal of the pure part-life view not fully considered by Metz, show how these resources help to accommodate the judgements that drive Metz to reject the view, and provide independent reasons why a pure part-life view would want to employ these resources (section 3). I then put these resources to use by reevaluating the considerations that Metz puts forward in support of his mixed view (section 4). Finally, I briefly discuss how this improved pure part-life view dissolves one of the puzzles that Metz raises for his own view (section 5).

2. Metz on the Bearers of Meaning

Metz begins his discussion of the potential bearers of meaning by drawing the distinction between a whole-life view and a part-life view thus:

What I call 'pure whole-lifers' maintain that the only bearer of meaning is an entire life composed of certain relationships between its parts. Typically, they maintain that what can make a life meaningful is solely a function of the narrative structure among the parts, viz., a story or biography characterizing one's existence that admits of aesthetic properties... In contrast, 'pure part-lifers' maintain that the only bearer of meaning is a part of a life 'in itself', usually a spatio-temporal segment such as the fulfillment of a desire or the performance of an activity.³

He admits to not having a fully developed account of what is to count as a part of a life. While he suggests that developing such an account would be a worthwhile endeavour, he proposes to make do with the intuitive notion of a part

³ Metz (2014), 37.

as a ‘subset of a person’s existence’, a phrase which he intends to cover a liberal range including ‘mere slivers of space-time’ as well as lengthy periods such as a person’s adolescence.⁴

Having drawn this distinction (and after distinguishing it from a couple of other distinctions), Metz turns to rejecting arguments in favour of a pure whole-life view. He finds that there seem to be clear cases in which parts of a life are meaningful or meaningless; for example, finding a cure for cancer seems to confer meaning while a period of time spent torturing babies for fun appears to be meaningless. Metz surveys some theoretical reasons for overruling the intuitive verdict about cases like that and finds them lacking. As I agree with him on that count and the pure whole-life view is not my concern in this paper, there is no need to go into any more detail here.

Metz’s argument against the pure part-life view is much shorter and consists of a list of ways in which a life can be meaningful not in virtue of any part of it, but rather in virtue of how such parts are related. Metz identifies five types of patterns that he thinks make for a meaningful life above and beyond the meaning that can be found in its parts.⁵

First, he suggests that variety makes for a more meaningful life.

Even if the parts of a very repetitive life were quite meaningful in themselves, most would sacrifice some meaning in the parts in order to avoid repetition in the pattern and thereby enhance the importance of the whole.⁶

Metz illustrates this idea with the movie *Groundhog Day* in which the Bill Murray character relives the same day over and over and, after a while, continues to fill the day with more and more meaningful activities. While the day is very meaningful towards the end, it does seem that repeating this day until the end of his life would leave the character with a less meaningful life than if he moved on to different things.

Second, Metz suggests that a life that gets better through time is more

⁴ Cf. Metz (2014), 39.

⁵ My presentation of this list of patterns slightly diverges from Metz’s. He seems to think that what I call the fourth kind of pattern is an instance of the third. On the other hand, he treats the ideas of bad parts causing good and bad parts causing goods in a particular way as distinct patterns while I lump them in together.

⁶ Metz (2014), 50.

meaningful than one that deteriorates. Metz's third suggestion is that a life is more meaningful if its bad or meaningless parts later cause good or meaningful ones. To learn from one's mistakes makes life more meaningful than to make mistakes and learn independently of them; to make good use of that learning is even more meaningful; and some ways of doing so confer more meaning than others. Fourth, Metz believes that a life's posthumous influence can confer meaning on it. Finally, he mentions the idea that a life can have meaning in making for a compelling and original story.

Having listed these ways in which the patterns of our lives can make a difference to their meaningfulness, Metz sees only one option for the friends of the pure part-life view: to bite the bullet on all of them.

Pure part-lifers must reply that our judgements about these relational features are confused, such that when we judge there to be more meaning for these reasons, what is actually motivating us is the implicit supposition that there would be a greater sum of meaningful parts.⁷

But there is another option. A pure part-lifer may concede the force of (some of) the examples and maintain that, while it is true that meaning obtains in virtue of these relational features, this additional meaning nevertheless accrues to the parts of a life rather than to the life as a whole. Thus the part-lifer is not forced to deny the impact of relational features but could try to accommodate them. Indeed, I believe that a thoughtful version of the pure part-life view would already have the resources to accommodate relational features. In fully working out their view, then, pure part-lifers could approach Metz's list with an open mind. Of some of the features they might actually want to deny that they confer additional meaning. But they do not have to say this about all of them; some of these features can be accommodated within a pure part-life framework. How exactly this works is what I turn to next.

⁷ Metz (2014), 51.

3. Parts and Their Meaning

3.1 Extrinsic Final Value

To have meaning in one's life is valuable for its own sake. Thus, meaning is what is often called a *final* good.⁸ It has also been common for a long time to refer to such values as *intrinsic* goods. While this usage of the term 'intrinsic' remains common currency in many contexts, it is now widely recognized as inaccurate. Beginning with Christine Korsgaard's influential paper 'Two Distinctions in Goodness' ethicists have increasingly come to accept that the distinction final/non-final value (instrumental value being the most salient example of the latter category) cuts across the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value. The former distinguishes things that are being (or ought to be) valued for their own sake from those that are valued (merely) for the sake of something they are suitably related to. The latter distinguishes things that are valuable in virtue of their intrinsic properties from those that have value (partly) in virtue of their relational properties.⁹

Part of the reason why people have traditionally used the term 'intrinsic' to denote what we now call 'final' is that, following G.E. Moore, it was assumed that final value could only ever accrue to something in virtue of its intrinsic properties.¹⁰ Thus, the distinction between final and intrinsic value would be one without a difference.¹¹ But the arguments of Korsgaard and others have convinced many people that this is not so, or that it can at the very least be reasonably doubted.¹² Shelly Kagan, for instance, provides a number of cases that he takes to be instances of extrinsic final value. Among the items he considers is the pen Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.¹³ This pen, he claims, has final value (is good for its own sake) in virtue of its instrumental history which is, of course, a relational property of the pen. Similarly, he claims that certain things can be finally valuable in virtue of their

⁸ Cf. Metz (2014), 62.

⁹ Cf. Rabinowicz/Roennow-Rasmussen (2000) for a particularly clear articulation of these cross-distinctions.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Moore (1922).

¹¹ Cf. Rabinowicz/Roennow-Rasmussen (2000), 34.

¹² Cf. Kagan (1992), O'Neill (1992), Hurka (1998). Cf. Zimmerman (2001) for an argument to the effect that the Moorean view equating intrinsic and final value is substantially correct.

¹³ Kagan (1992), 285.

uniqueness which is a paradigmatically relational property.¹⁴

The import of this brief discussion for the question at hand should be clear. If it is possible for final value to obtain in virtue of relational properties, the defender of the pure part-life view may claim that the meaning that is added to a life through various patterns is nevertheless a value that the parts have. Parts of a life, on this view, are meaningful (partly) in virtue of their relational properties. I will now turn to why I believe this move to be particularly plausible in the context of meaning.

3.2 Meaning as a (Mainly) Extrinsic Value

Metz is well aware of the possibility of extrinsic final value. Indeed, in his discussion of the value-theoretic differences between pleasure and meaning he claims that pleasure's final value is intrinsic whereas actions conferring meaning on a life often do so in virtue of their relational properties.

For example, consider creative behaviour. Imagine in one case that it is the result of substantial education, training, and effort, whereas in another case it is the consequence of taking a pill. Or imagine in one case that creative behaviour results in a novel art-object that others appreciate, whereas in another one it does not. In both pairs of cases, it is natural to say that we could have the same creative activity but differential meaning, because of how it was brought about and what its results were.¹⁵

This seems exactly right to me.¹⁶

Consider also that the very phrase 'meaning of life' points to an essentially relational concept. When we use the term 'meaning' in other contexts we refer straightforwardly to a relation. To say that a sentence or a symbol is meaningful is simply to say that it stands in a certain relation to something else. While Metz is right that it would be a mistake to assume that 'meaning' connotes the same concept in 'meaning of (or in) life' as in the context of language, it is surely no accident that we refer to this particular value with a term that has such strong

¹⁴ Kagan (1992), 282.

¹⁵ Metz (2014), 67.

¹⁶ It may be worth noting that meaning is in this respect different not only from pleasure but also from the Kantian conception of moral worth.

relational connotations.¹⁷ When we say that a life was meaningful we do not say that it was a symbol for something else. But we do, I believe, mean that at least some parts of the life stood in significant relations to things or events outside themselves.

Again, Metz will need no convincing here. His account of the concept of meaning in life¹⁸ as well as his favourite conception of it¹⁹ are clearly formulated in terms that put relational properties front and centre. But if a part of my life can be (and typically is) meaningful in virtue of its relational properties, what reason is there to reject a pure part-life view of the bearers of meaning? After all, we could simply say that the bearers of meaning are always parts of a life but that these parts are sometimes meaningful in virtue of their relations to other parts.

3.3 Locating Values

To answer the question just posted it will be helpful to appeal to Metz's distinction between the bearer of a value and its source.

I have claimed that a pleasant life consists of certain experiences that are good for their own sake, while a meaningful life is (substantially) made up of certain actions that are good for their own sake. Experiences and actions are in what these values respectively inhere, and they are to be contrasted with the source of these values, i.e., on what the values logically depend in order to inhere.²⁰

Put in these terms a pure part-life view could claim that meaning inheres always in a part of a life but that the source of this meaning (what its inherence logically depends on) can be a relation between the meaningful part and some other part. In order to resist such a move, Metz's arguments against the pure part-life view are insufficient. While he argues that certain patterns can *enhance* the meaning of a life, he nowhere gives us a reason to believe that this additional value *inheres* in the life as a whole, rather than in some part of it. What we need

¹⁷ Cf. Metz (2014), 21-2.

¹⁸ Cf. Metz (2014), 34.

¹⁹ Cf. Metz (2014), 222.

²⁰ Metz (2014), 66.

is an argument not about the source of meaning but about its bearer (or location).

This question regarding the location of extrinsic final value has not been widely explored. The most direct and thorough discussion to date can be found in Thomas Hurka's 'Two Kinds of Organic Unity'.²¹ Hurka's discussion starts with Moore's famous principle of organic unities according to which the (final) value of a whole does not have to be equal to the sum of the value of its parts.²² Hurka points out that there are two ways of interpreting that claim. Moore's own interpretation is that the parts remain just as valuable inside a whole as outside of it, but that the whole itself bears additional value. This is what Hurka terms the 'holistic' interpretation. On the other hand, there is the 'conditionality' interpretation according to which the value of the parts itself changes when they are part of a given whole.²³ While Hurka admits that both of these interpretations can in all cases reach identical verdicts about the overall value of a whole, he argues that they have different value theoretic implications that allow for a choice between them.²⁴ Importantly, he insists that this choice is best made on a case by case basis rather than by appeal to general philosophical ideas about the metaphysics of value that would rule out one or the other interpretation.²⁵

Hurka presents two criteria for choosing between a holistic and a conditionality interpretation of a given organic unity. First, he asks us to consider whether the whole or a part appears to be the appropriate object of evaluative attitudes. Say that A by itself has little or no value but that the whole comprised of A and B has considerably more value than B. Hurka argues that in some situations with such a structure it will seem more natural to say that we should be pleased about A, and in some situations it seems more appropriate to be pleased about A+B. As it happens the examples he gives to illustrate these two options are both on Metz's list of patterns that confer meaning on life. Hurka thinks that when we consider posthumous achievement we should think that what we should be pleased about are the (ultimately successful) actions of the achiever, rather than the whole comprising both the action and the success.²⁶

²¹ Hurka (1998).

²² Cf. Moore (1903), 28.

²³ Cf. Hurka (1998), 300-5.

²⁴ Cf. Hurka (1998), 299-300.

²⁵ Cf. Hurka (1998), 320.

²⁶ Cf. Hurka (1998), 306. In support of this claim Hurka argues that it helps to make sense of the idea that people have self-interested reasons to care about their posthumous achievements. If the value was not located in the person's life but in the whole comprising their activities and events after their life, it

By contrast when we consider the idea that it is more valuable for a life to get better rather than worse, it seems that what we should take pleasure in is the progression from bad to good rather than either of these parts (apart from the pleasure we should take in the good part's independent goodness).

A second criterion for choosing between the holistic and the conditionality interpretation has to do with whether the parts that comprise the whole are to be treated symmetrically or asymmetrically. The former suggests a holistic, the latter a conditionality interpretation. The example of a life getting better seems to call for symmetric treatment of the parts. It would be arbitrary to say either that the good parts are better because they were preceded by the bad, or that the bad parts are better because they were followed by the good. The parts are related symmetrically rather than as enabler and enabled. By contrast, consider the Kantian idea that happiness is good only if it is combined with a good will which itself is unconditionally good. Here there is a clear asymmetry between the parts of the whole 'happiness plus virtue' and the extra value seems to accrue to happiness which would have no value otherwise (while virtue had its supreme value all along).²⁷

3.4 Three Strategies for Defending the Pure Part-Life View

The preceding discussion has brought into focus a strategy for defending a pure part-life view not considered by Metz. The pure part-lifer can concede that the way that the parts of a life are patterned contributes to its meaning, while arguing that this meaning is nevertheless located in the parts rather than the life as a whole. That being said, the part-lifer may, of course, also take the route that Metz suggests to be her only option: to deny that some of the suggested patterns suggested actually enhance the meaning of a life. A third strategy not yet discussed takes aim at a mixed view like Metz's that includes whole lives as potential bearers of meaning, without providing direct support for a pure part-life view. This strategy consists in claiming that, even if there is meaning that does not seem to inhere in a particular part of a life, the life as a whole is even more implausible as a candidate location for that meaning.

I think that pure part-lifers would do best to employ a mix of all three of these strategies in resisting a mixed view that includes a whole-life element. I

becomes somewhat mysterious how such a value is one that is of special concern *to* the agent.

²⁷ Cf. Hurka (1998), 308-9.

cannot fully develop a pure part-life view here. But I will briefly indicate for each of the items of Metz's list of patterns what I take to be the most promising response on behalf of the pure part-live view.

4. The List of Patterns Revisited

4.1 Variety

The thought that 'variety is the spice of meaning' is certainly initially attractive but the longer I think about it the less clear it seems to me what this is actually supposed to mean. It does not help that Metz's example involves the movie *Groundhog Day*. The problem with the example is that it suggests a way in which lack of variety reduces the meaningfulness of our lives that does not speak against a pure part-life view at all. For the most natural interpretation of the example is that a lack of variety would make for a life that is boring for the one who lives it (this, I take it, is the main reason why the Bill Murray character is so relieved when the world finally moves on again). As Metz seems to acknowledge at various places, boredom is what he calls 'anti-matter', i.e. the kind of thing that reduces meaning in life (even if it is not incompatible with it).²⁸ But this thought is easily accommodated within a pure part-live view. Whenever there is boredom in a part of a person's life, this part has negative meaning (or less meaning than it otherwise would). There is no need to locate meaning in life as a whole.

Thus, despite what his example suggests, this cannot be what Metz has in mind. Rather it has to be that the absence of variety in itself makes for a less meaningful life, even if the person never got bored of what they are doing. Once the absence of boredom is stipulated, however, I find variety's claim to meaningfulness much less compelling. Would we really want to say of a doctor who spends her entire life curing malaria without ever getting bored or blasé about it that her life would have been more meaningful if instead she had invested some of her time in other meaningful activities (such as appreciating exquisite art or, even, curing yellow fever)? I find myself inclined to answer no to this question. I will concede that a person with more variety in their life will probably make for a more interesting conversation partner (and thus better

²⁸ Cf. Metz (2014), 62; 174; 196.

friend); but I find it hard to believe that this could be a criterion for how meaningful their life is.

I am not quite ready to dismiss variety, however. One interpretation that I have not considered yet is that a more varied life would make for a more compelling life story. Maybe that is what Metz has in mind. The idea of a compelling life story is its own entry on Metz's list, however. And so I will leave variety behind for now.

4.2 Improvement

The idea that a life that starts out poorly and becomes better as it goes is more meaningful than one that displays the opposite pattern is hard to accommodate within a pure part-life view. Indeed, as we saw in section 3.3 it is this very example that Hurka uses to illustrate his claim that sometimes a holistic interpretation that locates the value in a whole rather than its parts is sometimes superior to the rival conditionality interpretation.

However, Hurka's claims are about value in general, rather than meaning in particular. And I for one find no plausibility in the claim that a life's improving rather than deteriorating enhances its meaningfulness. It may be worth noting here that both authors Metz cites in support of this claim (Michael Slote and Frances Kamm) make their claims, like Hurka, in terms of the generic goodness of a life rather than its meaning.²⁹ I think that the claim that improvement makes for a better life is somewhat plausible when we think about well-being. Having a bad childhood followed by happy sunset years may well be better for us than the opposite. But would we really want to say that Kant had a more meaningful life than Hume simply in virtue of and because he wrote his great philosophical works later in life? I think not.

Things are different, however, when we consider the related idea that meaning is gained when bad or meaningless parts of our life lead to good or meaningful ones. To this I turn next.

4.3 The Bad Causing the Good

Metz illustrates this idea with a case of a person who spends a period of time

²⁹ Cf. Slote (1983); Kamm (2003).

as a prostitute in order to finance her drug habit. This appears to be a paradigmatically meaningless part of this person's life. However, as time goes by she overcomes her addiction and begins to work as a counsellor for people in similar situations (this part of her life is meaningful). The suggestion here is that she is a good counsellor precisely because she went through the earlier meaningless period, presumably because she has first-hand knowledge of what the life of her clients is like.³⁰

I think that denying that there is additional meaning here is not a plausible move. Thus, the pure part-lifer should hold that, while indeed a life with this pattern is more meaningful than one that has analogously meaningless and meaningful parts that are unrelated, this additional meaning is to be located in the parts. Or, in Metz's terms: while the pattern is the source of the meaning, the parts are its bearers.

Thinking back to Hurka's second criterion the pure part-lifer may seem to be in dire straits. Hurka suggested, remember, that a holistic view should be favoured when it seems arbitrary which of two parts of a whole we should think to be more valuable in virtue of the other part's co-presence. This is plausibly the case here. We might say that the period of drugs and prostitution is less meaningless (somewhat meaningful?) because of what it later led to. Or we may say that the period as a counsellor is more meaningful in virtue of what caused it. I do not think that either of these statements is inherently more plausible than the other, and picking between them would be arbitrary in exactly the way that Hurka objects to.

However, this test is inconclusive. And I think that Hurka's first criterion favours a part-life ascription of the meaning. It seems to me that in thinking about this case both the good and the bad period are appropriate objects of our attitudes. Unlike in Hurka's example involving a simple progression from bad to good the two descriptions I gave in the last paragraph are symmetrical because they are both plausible. It does actually seem that being redeemed in the way described confers meaning on the very period of prostitution that would otherwise have been (more) meaningless. And it also seems right that the later period seems more meaningful for having the background that it does. Thus, the pure part-life view can plausibly claim that the additional meaning in cases like this inheres in both the redeemed and redeeming parts rather than in the pattern

³⁰ Cf. Metz (2014), 46-7.

itself.

But suppose this move fails to convince. Those who want to include a whole-life component would still not be out of the woods. For against them the pure part-lifer could use the third strategy adumbrated above and demand that they show that it is indeed the *whole* life of the prostitute/counsellor that is bearing this meaning. Especially given Metz's liberal understanding of 'part' the pure part-lifer may reasonably claim that the meaning that comes from the pattern of redemption inheres, if not in the redeemed and the redeeming part, in the part that consists of both of these periods. The fact that we are able to talk about the meaning of these two parts and the pattern connecting them, without knowing anything else about our protagonist's life, seems a fair indication that it is not her whole life that bears the meaning in question but simply these two episodes.

4.4 Posthumous Effects

In debates about well-being it is a very controversial question whether events after one's death can have an effect on how good a life went for the person living it. Many people take it to be obvious that the answer to this question has to be no.³¹ But such worries would seem clearly misplaced when the value at issue is meaning. Here is Metz:

And, still more, many in the field believe that posthumous influence would confer meaning on one's life. Many of us seek to make ripples from the splash of our lives that would continue once we have gone under. Sundry ripples might be children, books, paintings, tombstones, buildings, or memories. Better that 5000 people benefit from and recognize one's accomplishments now and another 5000 also do so in the next generation than that 10,000 do so now but none does so posthumously. Or so I presume the reader will agree.³²

One may quibble over the question whether posthumous influence is *more* meaningful than analogous influence during one's life (as implied by the quote). But what is truly puzzling about this passage is that it appears in the context of

³¹ Cf. e.g. Sumner (1996), 127.

³² Metz (2014), 50.

motivating the inclusion of the whole-life component in Metz’s position on the bearers of meaning.

How exactly a life is to be delineated is not a trivial question. Whether something is part of my life or related to it is often not easy to decide. But one constraint on answering this question is surely to respect the fact that death is the end of life. That is to say that anything happening after one’s death is not part of one’s life (though it may be intimately related to it in all kinds of ways). Thus, posthumous effects of one’s life are something that cannot be accommodated without allowing for extrinsic final value – regardless of whether one has a part-life or a whole-life view. And once this point is made clear it seems to me that the examples of ‘ripples’ that Metz gives all lend themselves to a part-life treatment. If people still read Toni Morrison’s books, this makes her writing of those books meaningful rather than her life as a whole (Martin Heidegger’s work may be an even stronger case in point). Analogous things can be said, I believe, about painting, raising children, and constructing buildings.

I conclude that the case of posthumous effects demonstrates two things. First, it is not promising to think of meaning as solely an intrinsic value. As discussed in section 3.2, meaning is a final value that will often depend on relational properties. But secondly, for whatever difficulties a pure part-life view may have in capturing the meaning bestowed by events and patterns that cannot be clearly be attributed to any particular part of a life, adding a whole-life component is an unpromising solution. We will return to this point in section 5.

4.5 A Compelling Story

The last item on Metz’s list of meaning-bestowing patterns is that a life is meaningful if it “makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story.”³³ Now, what exactly this comes to is an issue that Metz leaves for another day:

I still lack a general and basic account of how to distinguish compelling life-stories from ones that are not so hot.³⁴

This makes it somewhat difficult to evaluate the proposal. But there are a few things that can be said. First, Metz’s view cannot be that a life could be

³³ Metz (2014), 235.

³⁴ Metz (2014), 235.

meaningful simply in virtue of it being the case that one could write a biography of the person that would make for a compelling read. The reason for this is that the kinds of things that make for what Metz calls anti-matter, i.e. things that deprive a life of meaning may be very interesting to read about. One could write a compelling biography of, say, Hannibal Lecter; but Metz would not want to count Lecter's life as meaningful. Similarly, I suggested earlier that being someone that it would be interesting to have a conversation with cannot plausibly be the hallmark of a meaningful life. What we can learn from having to reject both of these interpretations of what makes for a compelling life-story is that a life is not meaningful (in the sense of finally valuable) simply in virtue of being *interesting* for an outside observer.

A more promising way of thinking about what lies behind the metaphor of a compelling life-story is in terms of a life that is setting a good and inspirational example for others. In keeping with the ideas discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4 we would probably want to say that more meaning is generated if that example is actually being followed. But even if nobody does follow it there might be some meaning in a life in virtue of it being the kind of life that *should* be inspiring people. This interpretation would also provide an explanation why a life is less meaningful if it is "merely an accidental repeat, let alone an intentional copy, of someone else's."³⁵ For such a life would be following an example rather than setting one. We might also think that a life that is fun to learn about (maybe partly in virtue of the variety it includes) would be more likely to inspire others. Thus, we would have an explanation of why a meaningful life is often the possible object of a compelling biography. Obviously, much more would need to be said here. But, like Metz, I will leave this for another occasion.

Supposing, however, that something like the sketch in the last paragraph is the best way to make sense of the idea that a compelling life-story makes for a (more) meaningful life, I again, see no reason why this meaning should be thought to accrue to the life as a whole rather than to those parts that are inspiring. Of course, sometimes what is inspiring will be patterns like the ones discussed in the past couple of sections. But as we have seen there, these patterns are not best construed as being features of life as a whole. Thus, this last item on Metz's list cannot supply any fresh reason to reject a pure part-life view.

³⁵ Metz (2014), 51.

If anything, it could give added force to a reason generated by a different pattern.

5. The Ground of Narrative Structure

I claimed early on that this paper would propose a friendly amendment to Metz's view. I have so far focused on the amending part. I should like to demonstrate that the amendment is indeed a friendly one. So, before I conclude, let me briefly consider how my argument all but dissolves a puzzle that troubles Metz and that he finds himself unable to deal with to his own satisfaction. Witness the following passage.

To see the problem, consider the most straightforward proposal about what grounds narrative structure in a human person's life:

(GNS 1) A narrative structure is constituted by every spatio-temporal moment of one's life.

If (GNS 1) were true, no life-story would be a good read, or would otherwise exhibit the kind of coherence that is characteristic of a narrative structure. It would have to include daily mention of eight hours of sleep. A good third of the hours spent every day are not only terribly boring, but also fairly constant over the course of one's life. Imagine a novel a third of which were pages with 'zzzzzzzz' on them, perhaps generously peppered with 'snore'; the whole would be marred.³⁶

Metz then considers a number of ways of excluding moments where one is not conscious as well as 'dead time' (such as time brushing one's teeth or dusting the living room) to end up with the suggestion that whether and to what degree a life has a meaning-conferring narrative structure should be based on "only those spatio-temporal moments of one's life of which one is aware beyond the dead time that is average for human beings."³⁷ He is not fully satisfied with the suggestion, however, for two reasons. First, this view does not account for the fact that the narrative structure can be influenced by both things outside of

³⁶ Metz (2014), 52.

³⁷ Metz (2014), 54.

one's consciousness and events after one's death. Second, there could be cases where large amounts of dead time do not negatively impact the narrative structure of a life (such as when an entire generation of humans were to go into a long freeze only to continue life like nothing happened afterwards).³⁸

Interestingly, however, Metz also remarks, just after the passage quoted above, that it shows that the whole-life view is “not to be taken literally.”³⁹ In my view this is really all that needs to be said here. As I have tried to show throughout section 4, the patterns that motivate whole-lifers are often best thought of as sources rather than bearers of value. But even in cases where that reply fails to convince, it is a mistake to go to life as a whole as the bearer of meaning. Life as a whole contains both too much (such as times spent sleeping) and too little (such as events after one's death) to be the bearer of the value that comes into our lives through these patterns. What these patterns show us is not that the meaning in life is not borne by its parts; it is that much (maybe most) of the meaning in the parts of a life obtains in virtue of the relational rather than the intrinsic properties of these parts.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that, with regard to the bearers of meaning, Metz should abandon his mixed view according to which meaning is borne both by parts of lives and by lives as a whole. I have shown that once we bring into focus the fact that meaning is a value that largely depends on relational (rather than intrinsic) properties a pure-part life view has the resources to accommodate many of the intuitions that Metz uses to motivate rejecting it. The pure part-lifer can admit that meaning depends on certain patterns as a *source* while insisting that it nevertheless *inheres* in a given part. Moreover, while it may sometimes seem counterintuitive to locate some meaning in a particular part of a life, it is typically no less counterintuitive to locate this meaning in life *as a whole*. Thus, even if the pure part-life view needed to be rejected, the necessary amendment would not consist in the addition of a whole-life aspect.

³⁸ Metz (2014), 54-5.

³⁹ Metz (2014), 52.

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Fundamentality and Extradimensional Final Value

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Abstract

I argue that life's meaning is not only a distinct, gradational final value of individual lives, but also an "extradimensional" final value: the realization of meaning in life brings final value along an additional evaluative dimension, much as the realization of depth in solids or width in plane geometric figures brings magnitude along an additional spatial dimension. I go on to consider the extent to which Metz's (2013) fundamentality theory respects the principle that life's meaning is an extradimensional final value, and consequently suggest that the theory may stand in need of further refinement and supplementation.

1

In the introductory chapter of his *Meaning in life* (2013), Metz helpfully articulates some principles that any conception of life's meaning should respect if it is to keep within the boundaries of the central concept at play in the relevant value-theoretic literature. One principle is that life's meaning is a feature of individual lives (whether in whole or in part), not merely a feature of humanity in general, life as such, and so on. Another principle is that life's meaning is a final value—a feature of individual lives that is desirable in its own right. This final value is also gradational: it can be realized to varying degrees, individual lives can be more or less meaningful. Yet another principle is that the final value is a distinct one, in the sense that it is neither identifiable with, nor reducible to a mere species of, any of the more familiar (e.g. moral, alethic, aesthetic, hedonic) forms of final value.

I quite agree that any conception of life's meaning should respect these principles. Any conception according to which meaning in life turns out to be a feature only of something other than individual lives, merely an instrumental value, an all or nothing affair, or just (a species of) moral, alethic, aesthetic, or

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hedonic final value, would seem clearly to be working outside the boundaries of the relevant concept. I think, however, that there is further principle that should be added to the list. My ultimate purpose in what follows is to consider Metz's own conception—the fundamentality theory he presents in the twelfth chapter of his book—in the light of this further principle. In the next section I will lay out the nature and plausibility of the principle. I will go on in the final section to consider the extent to which the fundamentality theory may be said to respect it.

2

The further principle I have in mind is motivated by a serious consideration of pretheoretic metaphors for life's meaning. It is noteworthy that among these metaphors, spatial ones are especially common. Thus, as Wolf (2010) writes, meaning in life “is commonly associated with a kind of depth. Often the need for meaning is connected to the sense that one's life is empty or shallow” (pp. 7-8).

The central suggestion of the spatial metaphors seems to be about added dimensionality: meaning in life has to do with final value along an additional evaluative dimension, just as depth in solids or width in plane geometric figures has to do with magnitude along an additional spatial dimension. Relative to the magnitudes realized by rectangles, for example, cuboids realize a magnitude along an additional spatial dimension—an “extradimensional” magnitude; and rectangles realize an extradimensional magnitude relative to the magnitude realized by straight lines. Similarly, we may say in the light of the spatial metaphors, relative to the more familiar forms of final value that lives devoid of meaning may realize, meaningful lives realize a final value along an additional evaluative dimension—an extradimensional final value.

There are two important features of an extradimensional magnitude like depth or width: its realization always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one other magnitude from which it is distinct, and its realization always yields more overall spatial magnitude than the realization to that degree of the other magnitude alone. Thus the realization of depth in a cuboid always involves the realization to a certain degree of length and width, as the realization of width in a rectangle always involves the realization to a certain degree of length; yet a cuboid with a certain length and width always has more overall spatial magnitude than a rectangle with the same length and width, and a

rectangle with a certain length always has more overall spatial magnitude than a straight line of the same length.

We may appeal to analogous features to define the relevant notion of an extradimensional final value:

Extradimensional final value: a final value whose realization (1) always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value and (2) is always more finally valuable overall than the realization to that degree of the more familiar form of final value alone.

To illustrate, consider famously realized final value—final value, that is, whose realization is widely praised. One might suppose that it counts as an extradimensional final value, on the grounds that its realization always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value. But is the realization of famously realized final value more finally valuable overall than the realization, to the relevant degree, merely of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves? I think there is some room for reasonable doubt here. Suppose that I realize famously realized final value by realizing moral final value to a certain degree: I intentionally afford you the consideration you morally deserve, and my doing so is widely praised. Suppose further that you realize moral final value to the same degree without realizing famously realized final value: you intentionally afford someone else the consideration they morally deserve, but your doing so goes quite unpraised. Must my realization of famously realized final value be more finally valuable overall than your realization to the relevant degree of moral final value alone? Not obviously, perhaps partly because we tend to think of praise as a largely if not entirely instrumental value. (Praise seems desirable at least largely by virtue of the sort of behavior or attitudes it encourages.) So although famously realized final value may count as an extradimensional final value, there is some reason to think that it may not: although it clearly meets condition (1) above, it does not so clearly meet (2).

Now consider final value whose realization brings a sense of satisfaction or enjoyment to the agent—satisfyingly realized final value. As with famously realized final value, its realization seems always to involve the realization to some degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value; but its

realization is not clearly always more finally valuable than the realization to a similar degree merely of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves. I am overly impressed with the importance of my own work in mathematics, suppose, and get a great deal of satisfaction in whatever work I complete in the field, however good or bad it may be; you, by contrast, are hypercritical of your own mathematical efforts, and never get any real satisfaction out of the mathematical work you do (which is typically much better than my work). Suppose further that we both independently discover an excellent proof of a modestly interesting theorem in the field. My discovery thereby realizes satisfyingly realized final value by realizing to a certain degree alethic final value. But does this bring more overall final value than your discovery, which merely realizes alethic final value to a similar degree? Again, there's room for reasonable doubt. Despite my satisfaction at what I have done, driven by my inflated sense of self-importance, it is not obvious that I have realized more overall final value than you.¹

Perhaps a clearer example of extradimensional final value is to be found in the sort of final value that figures centrally in Taylor's (1981, 1987, 1999) creativity conception of life's meaning: uncommonly realized final value, i.e. rarely before (and in the maximal case, never before) realized final value. The realization of uncommonly realized final value seems also always to involve the realization to some degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value; I can only realize uncommonly realized final value through realizing moral or alethic or aesthetic or hedonic final value to some degree. And it is quite intuitive that the realization of uncommonly realized final value is always more finally valuable overall than the mere realization to the relevant degree of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves: there is something about the uncommonly realized nature of uncommonly realized final value—something about its rarity or uniqueness—that seems to render its realization always of more overall final value. Intentionally to afford a social group the consideration they morally deserve, in a society where the group is (and has long been) regularly afforded such consideration, is, I take it, to realize

¹ As an anonymous referee points out, one might try to avoid examples like this by insisting that the sense of satisfaction involved in satisfyingly realized final value be appropriate, and so not driven by such things as an inflated sense of self-importance. But the main challenge would then be to tease out the relevant notion of appropriateness in a non-question-begging way, i.e. in a way that does not simply assume that condition (2) is met.

moral final value to a moderate-to-fairly-high degree (notwithstanding its commonly realized nature); being one of the first intentionally to afford the group the consideration they morally deserve, where they have heretofore almost never received it, is to realize uncommonly realized final value by realizing moral final value to a similar degree. But it is very intuitive that the latter realization yields more overall final value than the former. Likewise, the realization of uncommonly realized final value through the realization to a certain degree of alethic final value (e.g. by being the, or one of the first to discover a proof for an interesting theorem) seems clearly to carry more overall final value than the realization to that degree of alethic final value alone (e.g. by being yet another in a long list to come up with such a proof); the realization of uncommonly realized final value through the realization to some degree of aesthetic final value (e.g. by composing the first great poem of a particular type) seems to be of more overall final value than the realization to a similar degree of aesthetic final value alone (e.g. by being the most recent in a very long line of authors to compose a great poem of the relevant type); the realization of uncommonly realized final value through the realization to a certain degree of hedonic final value (e.g. by intentionally generating a rarely experienced gustatory pleasure with one's culinary efforts) is intuitively of more overall final value than the realization to a similar degree of hedonic final value alone (e.g. by generating a commonly experienced gustatory pleasure); and so on.

With the notion of extradimensional final value thus explicated, I can now succinctly state the further principle about life's meaning that I think any conception of it should respect:

The extradimensionality of life's meaning (ELM): life's meaning is not just a distinct, gradational final value of individual lives, but also an extradimensional final value.

Properly understood, ELM has a good deal of intuitive plausibility and makes good sense of the pretheoretic metaphors that motivate it. Further, it allows us to accommodate—much better than we could without it—some frequently recurring views on life's meaning.

Consider, for example, the view that meaning in life has something importantly to do with transcendence—with “rising above” or “going beyond” the familiar or ordinary—in life. I suspect that this view is largely responsible

for the appeal of both supernaturalist and personal transcendence conceptions of life's meaning. According to supernaturalist conceptions (e.g. Fackenheim 1965, Quinn 1999, Cottingham 2003), meaning in life requires that a life transcend its familiar natural setting by relating in the right sort of way to a supernatural realm or being. On personal transcendence conceptions (e.g. Frankl 1966, Nozick 1981, Gewirth 1998; cf. Nietzsche [1872] 1961, More 2010), meaning in life requires that the individual living the life transcend ordinary limits to her personhood—that she become an extraordinary, significantly less limited sort of person.²

ELM allows us to accept the transcendence view without committing ourselves to these conceptions. Given ELM, meaning in life has something importantly to do with transcendence because it has something importantly to do with *evaluative* transcendence: for a life to be meaningful, on ELM, it must realize a final value that evaluatively goes beyond or stands above ordinary, more familiar final values, in the sense that its realization necessarily brings with it more overall final value than theirs (to the relevant degrees) alone. Yet this evaluative transcendence need not involve any sort of metaphysical or personal transcendence, as the supernaturalist and personal transcendence conceptions would have it. In light of ELM, we can say that these conceptions are right to insist on transcendence for meaning in life, but (perhaps) wrong to insist on the nonevaluative forms of transcendence to which they advert.

Or consider the view that meaning in life cannot simply be a matter of having a very high degree of any of the more familiar forms of final value in life—simply a matter of doing a great amount of moral good, acquiring a large amount of truth or knowledge, manifesting an impressive amount of beauty, or getting (or giving) a great amount of pleasure, in life. This view is most salient in those individuals who, despite knowing full well that their lives realize extraordinary amounts of the more familiar forms of final value, seriously wonder whether their lives have any appreciable meaning at all.³ These individuals do not seem guilty of any obvious, basic conceptual confusion, as if they were worried about whether the great deal of this or that final value they have realized in life makes their lives at all finally valuable. They seem rather to be thinking, however tacitly, that no high degree of the sort of final value they

² Some personal transcendence conceptions, such as Nozick's, seem also to be supernaturalist in character.

³ Historically, Tolstoy ([1882] 1983) serves as one of the most famous examples in the literature.

have (obviously) realized in their lives can alone be sufficient for meaning in life, and then asking themselves whether their lives have whatever else is required. They may harbor some ultimately mistaken conviction about the “whatever else” that tempts them towards a distressingly negative answer to their question,⁴ but the question itself seems quite reasonable to ask and attempt to answer.

Without ELM (or something very much like it), I think, we lack the resources to explain the view that meaning in life is not simply a matter of having a very high degree of the more familiar forms of final value in life. The principle that life’s meaning is a distinct final value, for example, does not explain it, for having a very high degree of one or another of the more familiar forms of final value is itself a final value that is so distinct: it is neither identical with nor a mere species of any of the more familiar forms of final value. But with ELM, we do seem to have the resources to explain the view. If ELM is accepted, meaning in life cannot be regarded as simply a matter of having a very high degree of more familiar final value in life, because merely to realize any form of such value to any degree (however high) is to realize something other than extradimensional final value, and meaning in life is an extradimensional final value. On ELM, therefore, the view apparently adopted by individuals who seriously wonder whether their lives have any appreciable meaning at all despite clearly having a very high degree of moral, hedonic, etc. final value is correct, and the question these individuals pose to themselves is quite rational.

Yet another frequently recurring view on life’s meaning (see, e.g., James [1895] 1979, Wittgenstein [1929]1965, Camus [1942] 1975, Kekes 2000, Haack 2002, Baggini 2005, Brogaard & Smith 2005, Reginster 2006, Goetz 2014) is that it has something specially to do with the worthwhileness of life. This view need not⁵ be understood as identifying, or even as asserting an analytic connection between, the concepts of meaning and worthwhileness in life: one can reasonably take meaning in life to be the prime candidate for what renders a life worth living (i.e. better lived than not, in an all-things-considered sense of ‘better’), for example, without holding that ‘meaningful life’ and ‘worthwhile life’ are synonymous or that ‘a meaningful life is a worthwhile life’ is analytically true. And the view is powerfully supported by the well-known Schopenhauerian insight that life inevitably involves so much *disvalue* along the

⁴ In Tolstoy’s case, the mistaken conviction seems to be more or less what Metz aptly calls the “perfection thesis” (2013, pp. 138ff.).

⁵ And if Metz (2012) is right, should not.

more familiar dimensions of final evaluation—so much moral, alethic, aesthetic, and hedonic evil or badness—that the realization of no amount of countervailing value along such dimensions could alone make it worthwhile.⁶ As the thought goes: in light of the inevitable final disvalue it includes, life could only be rendered worthwhile by realizing a particularly substantial sort of final value; and meaning in life seems particularly well suited to fit this evaluative bill.

To think that meaning in life is so suited is to hold the view that life's meaning has something specially to do with its worthwhileness. And that view is perfectly intelligible on ELM. Because, as ELM has it, life's meaning is an extradimensional final value, it is, unlike the more familiar forms of final value, a uniquely plausible candidate for the sort of value whose realization can render a life better, all things considered, lived than not.

3

ELM thus has much to be said in its favor: not only does it have considerable intuitive appeal and account for the pretheoretic metaphors that motivate it, it also allows us to explain the appeal of various recurring views on life's meaning. Accordingly, I think, ELM deserves to be added to the list of framework principles about life's meaning. I want now to consider Metz's fundamentality theory in the light of this further principle.

Here I will be concerned only with the fundamentality theory as a conception of life's meaning *simpliciter*—as a conception of what Metz calls “*pro tanto* meaning” (2013, pp. 39 & 220); for present purposes I will leave aside his richly rewarding discussions of the ways in which this theory may be developed into an account of both “on-balance” meaning in life (pp. 146-56 & 235-6) and negative meaninglessness (evaluative “anti-matter”) in life (pp. 63-4 & 234). In this basic form, the fundamentality theory takes meaning in life to be essentially a function of the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence:

The fundamentality theory: An individual's life is meaningful just to the

⁶ Sober reflection on ordinary life, Schopenhauer famously argued, should drive us to the conclusion that life is simply “a business that does not cover the costs” ([1844] 2011, ch. 45, p. 638; cf. [1893] 1974, pp. 291-305). Benatar (2006, chs. 2 & 3) provides a jarring, recent expression of this Schopenhauerian insight.

extent that in her life she exercises her rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence.

Rationality (or reason) is here to be understood very broadly: it is meant to include “all intuitive facets of intelligence of which human beings are characteristically capable and animals, even higher ones such as chimpanzees, are not” (Metz 2013, p. 223). Thus it includes not just “certain kinds of cognition and intentional action” but also many things that other theorists “might call ‘non-rational facets of our nature’,” such as various forms of judgment-dependent desire, emotion, or conation (p. 223). And for an individual to exercise her rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence is for her to exercise it in such a way that either promotes these conditions (i.e. encourages their obtaining) or protects them (i.e. discourages their no longer obtaining) (pp. 233-4).

What then are the fundamental conditions of human existence that, according to the theory, rationality must be so exercised in favor of? They are, Metz says, conditions of broad human domains—human personhood, human sociality, and human environmental situatedness—and “largely responsible for many other conditions” of human existence (2013, p. 226). Thus, whereas the disposition rationally to care for other human beings as such, as a condition of both human personhood and human sociality (pp. 228-9), counts as fundamental, the disposition merely to share with or care for one’s own best friend presumably does not. Similarly, whereas the capacity of the human species to survive through natural selection, as a condition of human environmental situatedness, counts as fundamental (p. 229), my capacity to survive the particular strain of influenza I encountered last month does not. The fundamental conditions are all general conditions of broad human domains, causally responsible (at least in some structural sense) for a great many other particular conditions of human existence; the contrasting non-fundamental ones are particular conditions at best responsible for a few other particular conditions of human existence.

I take it, moreover, that Metz intends the fundamental conditions to be fundamentally good ones, or at least not fundamentally bad ones. This is why a deep-seated penchant for selfishness, violence, or destruction would presumably not in his view count as a fundamental condition of human existence even if it turned out to be of a broad human domain and largely responsible for many

other conditions of human existence. It would hardly be an attractive feature of the fundamentality theory to allow that great meaning in life can come through exercising one's rationality in favor of extreme selfishness, violence, or destruction.

So understood, it is clear that the fundamentality theory well respects the framework principles that Metz articulates in the introductory chapter of his book. The exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence is obviously a feature that individual lives can share, is of some final and not merely instrumental value, comes in degrees (conditions of human existence can be fundamental to greater or lesser degrees, one can more or less rationally act in favor of the fundamental conditions), and is neither identical to nor a mere species of any of the more familiar forms of final value.⁷ Hence, as essentially a function of the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence, life's meaning is, according to the fundamentality theory, a distinct, gradational final value of individual lives.

But what about ELM? Does the fundamentality theory respect it as well? On the theory life's meaning does seem to satisfy the first condition for extradimensional final value, namely, being such that its realization always involves the realization to some degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value. Consider the sorts of activities that seem (following Metz's suggestions) to count as paradigmatic realizers of the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence, and hence of meaning in life according to the theory: sacrificing one's personal well being in order to undermine a widely oppressive social regime (cf. 2013, p. 227); doing what one can to contribute to an institution of wide social benefit (cf. p. 227); promoting healthy interpersonal (including intimate) relationships in general (cf. p. 228); making scientific discoveries of sweeping scientific importance (cf. p. 229); coming up with powerful theoretical explanations (cf. p. 229); creating great artworks reflective of universal themes (cf. pp. 230-1); and inventing admirable means of increasing human pleasure or comfort (cf. p. 223). All of these appear to involve the realization to some degree of one or more of the more familiar

⁷ One might think that the exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence is merely a species of alethic (or epistemic, or intellectual) final value, but this would be a mistake given the broad sense of rationality here at play, which cuts across the other, more familiar forms of final value. Cf. Metz's remarks on how, given this broad sense of rationality, the fundamentality theory is not "overly intellectual" (p. 223).

forms of final value. Sacrificing one's personal well being in order to undermine a widely oppressive social regime, doing what one can to contribute to an institution of wide social benefit, and promoting healthy interpersonal relationships all seem to involve the realization to some degree of (at least) moral final value; making scientific discoveries of broad scientific importance and coming up with powerful theoretical explanations obviously involve the realization to a certain degree of alethic final value; creating great, universally-themed works of art involves the realization to some degree of aesthetic final value; inventing admirable means of increasing many others' pleasure or comfort is surely to some degree of hedonic final value; and so on.

I worry, however, that on the fundamentality theory life's meaning does not satisfy the second condition for extradimensional final value. Recall that condition: meaning in life must be such that its realization is always more finally valuable overall than the mere realization, to the relevant degree, of whatever other more familiar form of final value it involves. Compare now a situation in which meaning in life is on the fundamentality theory realized through the realization of moral final value to some degree, with a situation in which moral final value is to that degree alone realized. In the first situation, suppose, I exercise my rationality in favor of a fundamental condition of human existence by realizing moral final value to a moderate degree: I sacrifice a modest amount of my personal well being in order partially to undermine a widely oppressive social regime. In the second situation you merely realize moral final value to a similarly moderate degree: you sacrifice a large amount of your own well being in order completely to correct an injustice suffered by just a single individual with whom you are acquainted. (The realization of moral final value in this second situation does not count as an exercise of rationality in favor of a fundamental condition of human existence because it is only in favor of a particular condition of a particular individual, and hence not in favor of a general condition that is responsible for many other conditions of human existence.) Here, does my realization of what the fundamentality theory considers as life's meaning carry more overall final value than your realization to a moderate degree of moral final value alone? Is my action in the first situation more finally valuable overall than yours in the second situation? My intuition provides no clear answer here; it does not strike me as counterintuitive to say that your strong effort fully to correct an injustice suffered by a particular individual is just as finally valuable overall as my comparatively weak effort

partially to undermine a widely oppressive social regime.

In a similar vein, compare a situation in which meaning in life is, on the fundamentality theory, realized through the realization of alethic final value to a certain degree, with a situation in which alethic final value is to that degree alone realized: I realize alethic final value to a high degree by making a scientific discovery of modest interest to a broad range of scientists; you realize alethic final value to a similarly high degree by making a scientific discovery of great interest to a much narrower range of scientists. (My discovery, suppose, is of modest interest to all sorts of physicists, chemists, biologists, and so on; yours is of great interest just to a small handful of high-energy particle physicists.) I thus realize what the fundamentality theory takes to be life's meaning, but you do not: you merely realize alethic final value to the relevant degree. Does my discovery intuitively carry more overall final value than yours? I see no obviousness to the suggestion that it does; it strikes me as at least as plausible to suggest that your discovery is of pretty much the same overall final value as mine.

I suspect that similar examples, in which the realization of what the fundamentality theory takes as life's meaning is contrasted with the realization to the relevant degree merely of aesthetic or hedonic value, will turn out along similar lines: it is not obvious that the former sort of realization always yields significantly more overall final value than the latter. And if that is indeed the case, then it is unclear whether the fundamentality theory affords ELM its due respect. The exercise of rationality in favor of fundamental conditions of human existence seems clearly to meet one of the two conditions for extradimensionality, namely, that its realization always involves the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value. But it does not seem clearly to satisfy the other important condition—that its realization is always more finally valuable overall than the mere realization, to the relevant degree, of whatever more familiar form of final value it involves. To revert to a spatial metaphor that helped motivate ELM, the worry is that the fundamentality theory does not obviously capture the depth of life's meaning, only its width or length.

Even so, just how well the fundamentality theory respects the other key framework principles about life's meaning—much better than most conceptions in the literature—should not be ignored. Surely any conception that does so well respect the other principles is largely on the right track. The considerations I

have raised about the extent to which the fundamentality theory respects ELM call not, in my view, for wholesale abandonment of the theory but for its further refinement and supplementation. I am uncertain about the particular direction in which this refinement and supplementation will lead. But I am certain that, in whatever direction it leads, it will yield even more meaning in the life of the one who pursues it.

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Meaningful and More Meaningful

A Modest Measure

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Abstract

We often describe lives (or parts of lives) as meaningful or as not meaningful. It is also common to characterize them as more or less meaningful. Some lives, we tend to think, are more meaningful than others. But how then can one compare lives with respect to how much meaning they contain? Can one? This paper argues that (i) only a notion of rough equality can be used when comparing different lives with respect to their meaning, and that (ii) the relation of being more meaningful is not transitive. It follows that all attempts to rank different lives in terms of meaning can at best lead to partially indeterminate and incomplete rankings. One should also give up on the idea of “maximizing” meaning. I will use Thaddeus Metz’s important recent book *Meaning in Life. An Analytic Study* as a foil for my discussion.

1. Introduction

We often describe lives (or parts of lives) as meaningful or as not meaningful.¹ It is also common to characterize them as more or less meaningful. Some lives, we tend to think, are more meaningful than others. For instance, in his important recent book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* Thaddeus Metz puts his basic claim in the following way: “A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.”² This remark implies that there are degrees of meaningfulness, as Metz confirms in other parts of his book.³ According to him there is intrapersonal comparability of meaning: “... the goods of pleasure and meaning can be ordered in the sense that some parts of a life are more pleasant and more meaningful than others.”⁴ Metz adds a claim of intrapersonal aggregation: “... it appears that pleasure and

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¹ See for overviews on the recent discussion about the meaning of life: Metz 2002, 2007 and 2008.

² Metz 2013, 222; see also, with more detail, 233 and 235; see also, e.g., Joske 2000, 290-294; Schmidtz 2001, 172; Mawson 2010; Kauppinen 2013.

³ Metz 2013, 4, passim.

⁴ Metz 2013, 63.

meaning are intrapersonally aggregative, i.e., are amenable to rough judgments of how much of these goods there are in a given life overall. ... Given these kinds of roughly cardinal measurements of particular times in a life, one could conceivably add them up to inform an estimation of whether the life has enough pleasure in it to count as pleasant overall or period. Similar kinds of claims apply to meaning, even supposing ... that it can include whole-life elements.”⁵ Finally, Metz goes even one step further and accepts the claim of interpersonal comparability: “... pleasure and meaning appear to be interpersonally comparative, which means that we can compare different lives with regard to amounts of these goods. For all I know, my life is, so far, more pleasurable than Emily Dickinson’s was, but less meaningful than Albert Einstein’s.”⁶ Even if one does not interpret Metz – and there is no reason to do so – as saying that we can measure meaning by counting “units” of meaning and then adding up the units, he is still making a very strong claim here: that meanings can be compared across persons.⁷ There has been and still is a long and controversial discussion in economics about the possibility of interpersonal comparison of utility,⁸ and analogous claims about meaning deserve much more scrutiny than they seem to have deserved so far.

How then can one compare and rank lives with respect to how much meaning they contain? Can one? I will argue that Metz’ strong claims about comparability and rankability of meaningfulness cannot be upheld.

2. Incomparability or Indeterminate Rankings

It is tempting to take one’s lead from value theory and the orthodox view that there can be exactly three comparative evaluative relations between any two evaluated items A and B: A being better than B or A being worse than B or A and B being equally good. Similarly, one could assume that there are exactly three ways in which any two lives (or parts of lives; from now on I will focus on whole lives) can compare with respect to meaning: One life could be more meaningful than or less meaningful than or equally meaningful as the other life. Different lives (or parts thereof) are comparable with respect to meaningfulness

⁵ Metz 2013, 63.

⁶ Metz 2013, 63.

⁷ See also Metz 2013, 39-40, 158, 236.

⁸ Robbins 1938 is one of the classic contributions to this debate.

– where comparability is a reflexive, symmetric and transitive relation.⁹ I take it that Metz adheres to this orthodox view: Even though he does not seem to say so explicitly, there is no trace of adherence to any of the alternative views discussed below (which are the main options I can think of). Is this the correct way to look at lives, meaning and meaningful lives?

Two ideas should be put aside from the start. First, there is no common scale on which different lives can be measured and compared with respect to their meaning. The attribution of meaning to lives is in this respect not like the attribution of length to material objects. In a certain sense of the word “incommensurable” – one in which commensurability requires a common scale – lives are incommensurable. However, this does not mean they are incomparable. To be sure, Metz sometimes talks of “scales” when he talks about comparisons of meaningfulness¹⁰; however, as already pointed out above, there is no reason to take this in the very strong sense of a ratio scale which would allow the counting and adding up of units (like, e.g., in the case of length measurements). – Second, there is only so much “precision” in comparisons between lives (with respect to their meanings). There is certainly some amount of vagueness but also a certain roughness of the degree of granularity of comparison. But this alone does not speak against the possibility of comparison. Comparison need not be ideally “precise” (more on this below).¹¹

So, is it true that for any two lives either one is more meaningful than the other or they are (roughly) equally meaningful? Consider the life of Picasso and the life of Euclid (or, alternatively, Einstein and Dickinson). Is one more meaningful than the other? It seems we are at a loss if we try to answer this question in the positive; the question is even somewhat suspicious and might involve basic misunderstandings. Should we then rather judge that Picasso’s life and Euclid’s life are equally meaningful (roughly)? To deal with this latter question, consider a third life, the life of a painter which was not quite as glorious and meaningful as Picasso’s but still pretty meaningful. We would say that in that case Picasso’s life was more meaningful than the other painter’s life. If Picasso’s and Euclid’s lives were equally meaningful, then it seems that we should also say that Euclid’s life was more meaningful than the other painter’s

⁹ Given any three relata x , y and z : x is comparable to itself; if x is comparable to y , then y is comparable to x ; if x is comparable to y and y to z , then x is also comparable to z .

¹⁰ See, e.g., Metz 2013, 63-64.

¹¹ See also Metz 2013, 63 where he talks about “rough” aggregation. I take him to mean lack of precision as mentioned in the text above.

life (if $P=E$ & if $P>O$, then $E>O$). But this judgment seems as problematic as the judgment about Picasso's and Euclid's lives. Should we then conclude that Picasso's and Euclid's lives are incomparable with respect to meaning because neither is more meaningful than the other nor are they equally meaningful?¹²

This suggestion can be understood in more than one way. First, as the idea of incomparability in the strict sense: Some lives can in principle not be compared with each other (with respect to meaning) because neither is one more meaningful than the other nor are they equally good, and there are only these three possibilities: *quartum non datur*. Incomparability in this sense amounts to an analogue of the failure of completeness of the *better than*-relation.¹³

Second, there is the idea that *quartum datur*: that there is a fourth comparative relation besides *more*, *less* or *equally meaningful*. One could call it "in the same league (as far as meaning is concerned)".¹⁴ If two lives are in the same league, then neither is one more meaningful than the other nor are they equally meaningful. They are not comparable in the sense allowed for by the first, orthodox, view. But according to this second, less orthodox view they still can be compared with each other: Being in the same league is a relation *sui generis*.

Third, there is the idea of indeterminacy and truth-value gaps. Not only is it not true (as in the case of incomparability) that Picasso's life is more meaningful than or less meaningful than or as meaningful as Euclid's life but it is also not false that Picasso's life is more meaningful than or less meaningful than or as meaningful as Euclid's life.¹⁵ It is simply indeterminate how some lives compare with respect to meaning (more on this below).

The first idea, the idea of strict incomparability (a relation which is irreflexive, symmetric and not transitive), is not easy to understand: Why should it not be possible to compare two lives with respect to meaning, especially since not all lives would be incomparable? One might suspect that Picasso's life was too different from Euclid's life to be comparable. But why should the "size" of the difference matter? And how do we determine size of the difference anyway?

¹² See for this type of idea as applied to the *better than*-relation or the relation of strict preference: Raz 1985/86, 121; Raz 1986, 325-326, and Chang 1997.

¹³ See, e.g., Luce & Raiffa 1957, 23, 25; Sen 1985, 177-181; see also von Neumann & Morgenstern 1953, 26.

¹⁴ See for the analogue in the case of value relations, e.g., Chang 1997, 25-27 and Chang 2002; Chang uses the terms "parity" and "on a par".

¹⁵ See Broome 1997 for the parallel case of the *better than*-relation.

There do not seem to be answers available to these questions. As long as there aren't convincing answers one should remain skeptical of the idea of meaning incomparability (I don't want to argue so much against this view but rather propose and defend an alternative view here).

The third idea, though apparently more radical than the first one (not only is it not true to state certain comparative relations but it is also not false), seems to make more sense. There does not seem to be a good reason to think that our notion of meaning is so much "spelled out" that it would allow for a verdict about comparative meaning in every actual or even possible case. One should rather expect the notion of meaning to be somewhat "open" in the sense that its criteria of application do not determine a verdict in all possible or even actual cases.¹⁶

Some examples and cases from the more recent discussion of personal identity, for instance, are so far-fetched that one is tempted to say that our ordinary notion of personhood is not "built" for these kinds of cases and does not allow for a verdict about personal identity through time.¹⁷ Similarly in the case of meaning: This notion, one could suspect, is not "built" for applications to cases like the Euclid-Picasso case; it would be too much to expect that the notion determines a verdict in such cases. For instance, one major problem is that one would have to weigh different criteria against each other and the notion of meaning might not determine how to do that.¹⁸ Indeterminacy, openness and vagueness seem ineliminable. However, this third view is compatible with the orthodox view that there are exactly three comparative relations; it is just a general claim about the semantics of the relevant notions, not a metaphysical claim about what relations there are. So, this third view is not in competition with the other views.

As far as substantial ideas concerning comparative relations are concerned, this seems to leave us with the second idea, the idea of there being a fourth relation of being in the same league. Applied to the example above, we get the verdict that even though Picasso's life and Euclid's life are not equally meaningful and even though it is also not the case that one is more meaningful than the other, they are in the same league with each other. The life of "the other

¹⁶ See for semantic openness in general, e.g., Waismann 1945, 121-126, and, more recently, Ludlow 2006.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Parfit 1984, part 3.

¹⁸ See Mawson 2010 who emphasizes this point.

painter” could also be in the same league with Euclid’s life – even though Picasso’s life and the other painter’s life are not in the same league (in the sense of the word as used here: being in the same league with some X rules out standing in one of the other comparative relations with X) but the former is more meaningful than the latter. The relation of being in the same league is reflexive (because every life is exactly as meaningful as itself), symmetric (consider Picasso and Euclid) and not transitive (the other painter’s life is in the same league with Euclid’s life and Euclid’s life is in the same league with Picasso’s life but Picasso’s life is not in the same league with the other painter’s life). The set of lives with which a given life is in the same league are “centered” in the following sense: Every life has its own set of lives with which it is in the same league, and typically some of the other lives in the set have a different such set of their own.

However, there is another and even better way of describing the relation between Picasso’s and Euclid’s life. Instead of saying that they are in the same league as far as meaning is concerned one could rather say that they are equally meaningful. This might seem very puzzling or implausible at first, given the remarks above, but this impression changes quickly if one reminds oneself of the relativity to varying degrees of granularity (or standards of precision) which characterizes at least many judgments of equality.¹⁹

Consider measurements of the length of ordinary objects. It might be true to say of two boards for a bookshelf that they are equally long, say, e.g., both 1 meter long. This is, however, compatible with the one being one millimeter longer than the other. There is no contradiction here if (as seems plausible) the following is true. When we say of the two boards that they are “equally long” we use the term “equally long” with a certain not too fine degree of granularity (1 centimeter difference counts but we’re neglecting anything less than half a centimeter difference). If we wanted to be pedantic we could indicate the degree of granularity db (or the standard of precision sb) and use the term “equally long_{db}” (or “equally long_{sb}”) instead.

In other judgments of length different degrees and standards are in force. A watchmaker might truly say that one replacement piece for a watch is equally long as the original piece, namely .3 centimeters. This is compatible with one of the pieces being a tenth of a millimeter longer than the other. Again, there is no

¹⁹ See, for a related idea and one concerning value relations, Benbaji 2009.

contradiction if the watchmaker is using the term “equally long” with a somewhat finer but not excessively fine degree of granularity or standard of precision (half a millimeter does not count but one millimeter counts). Again, if we wanted to be pedantic we could say that the watchmaker is not using the above notion of being equally long_{db} but rather the notion of being equally long_{dw}. Judgments of equality show this implicit relativity to varying degrees of granularity. The idea of perfect precision does not even seem to make any sense: The notion of being equally long, as applied to ordinary objects, loses its sense when we go down to the scale of nanometers; at this order of “magnitude” the notion of length is not defined anymore for ordinary objects. One might be tempted to think that the expression “equally long” thus invites a contextualist semantics according to which speakers in different contexts of use might mean different things when they use this term, depending on the relevant degree of granularity.²⁰

Something similar happens with our judgments about lives being “equally meaningful”. When we compare Euclid’s life with Picasso’s life and judge that their lives are equally meaningful we use a very rough degree of granularity. We think about them as extraordinarily creative people in general who have made an important contribution. However, when we compare Picasso’s life with the other painter’s life we do in addition think of them as painters, perhaps even as painters of the same period. Our degree of granularity is much finer here. There is a hidden relativity to degrees of granularity in our judgments of equality of meaning (of lives). Judgments of equality (of meaning), again, might invite a contextualist semantics according to which different pairs of lives trigger different degrees of granularity for judgments of equality (of meaning). This notion of “relative” equality is different from the orthodox notion of “strict” equality (see above). Both relations are reflexive and symmetric but strict equality is transitive while relative equality isn’t.²¹

Insofar as this context-sensitivity and relativity is implicit and thus hidden, we can easily get puzzled or even confused when thinking about and comparing different lives with each other with respect to meaning, like the lives of Picasso,

²⁰ See, e.g., Stojanovic 2008 for the basic semantic options; see also Benbaji 2009, 325-327; I won’t pursue such semantic questions here.

²¹ Assume that stick I is 9.5 inches long, stick II 8.8 inches long and stick III 8 inches long. Given a relation of being equally long_{stick} with a degree of granularity or precision which does not distinguish between differences smaller than 1 inch, we would have to say that I is equally long_{stick} as II and II is equally long_{stick} as III but that I is not equally long_{stick} as III (but longer_{stick} than III).

Euclid and the other painter. As we go from one comparison (Euclid – Picasso) to another (Picasso – the other painter) we change the degree of granularity and switch to a more fine grained notion of equality; as we go from the latter comparison to the third one (the other painter – Picasso) we return to a rougher degree of granularity and a less fine grained notion of granularity. Each such notion of equality is reflexive, symmetric and not transitive. However, the problem is that we're using different notions of equality for different comparisons of meaning.

One could argue that the case of being in the same league (see above) collapses into the case of equality of a given degree of granularity. If this should turn out not to be so and if being in the same league is not the same as being equal given a certain degree of granularity, then I would have problems understanding what could be meant by “being in the same league”. What makes a lot of sense, however, is the granularity-relative notion of equality.

However, there is a price to pay: Things are in some respects more complicated with “relative” equality, as we could call this, than with “non-relative” equality. If the degree of granularity for the notion of being equally meaningful is rougher (or more fine-grained), then the degree of granularity for the notion of being more meaningful is also rougher (or more fine-grained). There is then not just one ranking of lives with respect to meaning but several which differ as to the degree of granularity. Consider a rougher ranking and a finer-grained ranking of lives with respect to meaning. Even if all the lives considered should have a definite position in the rougher ranking (e.g., Picasso, Euclid, the other painter and some others all equally high up while some others have less meaningful lives and still others perhaps even more meaningful lives; the position in the ranking would be determined by all the relations between the different lives), they might not all have a definite place in the more fine-grained ranking. For instance, while Picasso's life is, according to our example, more meaningful than the other painter's life it is not clear where Euclid's life is located on the finer-grained ranking: above, below or at the side of Picasso or the other painter. Some more fine-grained rankings will thus be “incomplete” in the sense that for some pairs of lives it will be indeterminate whether the one life is more meaningful (given the relevant degree of granularity) than the other or equally meaningful (again, given the relevant degree of granularity) as the other. There can be an interval of locations on the finer-grained ranking but no precise location. Indeterminacy (see above) comes

into play here.

One interesting implication of all this is that even though rankings of lives are still possible they will be limited given certain degrees of granularity (or standards of precision). The above remarks suggest that there are some uses of “more meaningful”, “less meaningful” and “equally meaningful” which do not allow for complete ranking of lives. This does, however, not mean that no or only very few comparisons of lives with respect to meaning are possible but only that there is a certain element of indeterminacy involved here. If one does not acknowledge this, one risks falling for misleading and overstretched ideas about comparing and ranking lives with respect to meaning.

All this goes against Metz’ much more “orthodox” views²² according to which parts of lives allow for both intra- and interpersonal comparison and whole lives for interpersonal comparison. These kinds of comparisons are supposed to allow even for some kind of additive aggregation of meaning. Given the remarks above, this kind of “measurement” of meaningfulness just isn’t possible. I do not see this at all as a reason to reject Metz’ view on meaning as a whole; rather one would have to modify it in certain ways in order to take into account the element of indeterminacy and the relativity to granularity in our judgments about comparative meaningfulness.

3. Non-Transitivity and Collapses of Rankings

If several items have determinate positions on some ranking and if item A is higher up on the ranking than item B while item B is higher up on the ranking than item C, then item A has to be higher up on that ranking than item C. This is due to the transitivity of the relation of being higher up on some ranking. This much seems pretty uncontroversial. However, it is not so clear whether we should think that lives can be ranked in such a way that there are more meaningful lives higher up and less meaningful lives lower down on the ranking. This kind of ranking requires transitivity but the crucial question is whether the relation of being a more meaningful life (or a less meaningful life) is transitive.²³ Is it? It seems that Metz is committed to a positive answer; I see no hints in his

²² See, again, Metz 2013, 222, 233 and 235; see also 39-40, 63-64, 158, and 236.

²³ For the role of the assumption of transitivity of strict preference or of the *better than*-relation in classical decision theory see Ramsey 1990, 78, 75; von Neumann & Morgenstern 1953, 26; Savage 1972, 18, 21.

work to doubts concerning transitivity.

Consider three lives (more precisely: very partial sketches of three lives) and let us make the very plausible assumption that more than one factor contributes to the meaning of a life.²⁴ For instance, as one factor to be considered here we can choose engagement with personal projects of value.²⁵ As the second factor to be considered here we can choose the making of positive contributions to the lives of others.²⁶ If one does not agree that these two factors contribute to meaning one can easily replace them by others – these kinds of details don't matter here. Metz himself advocates a family resemblance view about the notion of a meaningful life and mentions three different aspects of meaning in passing: purposiveness, transcendence and esteem.²⁷

The two factors just mentioned are not completely independent from each other and they do often overlap; however, all that is needed here is the realistic assumption that one factor cannot be reduced to the other and that they can vary against each other. Suppose for example that a chess player has had a life rich of engagement with the playing of the wonderful game of chess but that he has not made that much of a positive contribution to the lives of others. Compare this first chess player's life with the life of a second chess player who hasn't gotten quite as much out of playing the game as the first chess player but has made more of a contribution to the lives of others because he taught little children how to play the game. Finally, consider the life of a third chess player who was not as engaged with the game as the other two but who started a very successful social program in troubled neighborhoods of his home town which would bring the game to teenagers and thus keep them off the streets and give them some perspective which they would otherwise have lacked. Suppose for the sake of the example that this is all that matters to the meaning of these lives.

It might then well be that the first chess player's life is more meaningful overall than the second chess player's life: Even though the second had a bit

²⁴ See in general Mawson 2010.

²⁵ See, e.g., Schlick 1979; Taylor 1981, 1987, 1999, and 2000; Nozick 1981, 610-619; Sylvan & Griffin 1982; Bennett 1984; Kekes 1986 and 2000; Wisdom 1987; Teichman 1993; Wolf 1997a, 1997b, 2007 and 2010; Joske 2000; Schmidtz 2001; Thomson 2003, esp. ch.4; Cottingham 2003; Audi 2005, 333-334; Levi 2005; Thagard 2010; Metz 2011 and 2013; Smuts 2013; Kauppinen 2012 and 2013; see Wong 2008 on the value of identities; see also in general Wiggins 1987 and Hare 2000.

²⁶ See, e.g., Cottingham 2003; Audi 2005, 333-334; Kernohan 2006, 135; Wolf 2010; Smuts 2013; on whether morality and certain relations towards others are necessary or sufficient for or contributory to meaning see: Dahl 1987; Wolf 1997b and 2010; Thomas 2005; Landau 2011; Smuts 2013.

²⁷ See Metz 2013, 34-35.

more of a positive social impact, this is more than compensated for by the richer engagement with the game that the first chess player had. Similarly for the comparison between the overall meaning in the second chess player's life and in the third chess player's life: Even though the third player has made more of a positive contribution to the lives of others, the second player still got so much more out of the game than the third player, – so much more that overall the second player's life would count as more meaningful than the third player's life. But now compare the first chess player's life with the third chess player's life. The alleged transitivity of being more meaningful would ensure, given our assumptions, that the first chess player's life is also more meaningful overall than the third chess player's life.

However, there is a significant problem here. It might well be that the difference between the contribution to the lives of others that the third player has made is not just bigger than the first player's contribution; apart from that, it might also cross a “threshold” such that the difference of contribution between the first player's life and the third player's life weighs more than some “aggregative sum” of the difference of contribution between the first player's life and the second player's life and the difference of contribution between the second player's life and the third player's life. When one compares the first with the third player, the dimension of the contribution to the lives of others counts so much and weighs so heavily that it outweighs the difference between the respective quality of their engagement with the game. Hence, under such conditions we should judge that the third chess player's life is more meaningful than the first chess player's life.

Hence, we have a lack of transitivity for the relation of being a more meaningful life overall. This failure of transitivity – which is not the same as intransitivity (if life A is more meaningful than life B and life B more meaningful than life C, then life A is not more meaningful (or even less meaningful) than life C) – can be explained in a formal way. There are two independent criteria or factors and at least one of them (here the contribution factor) is “non-linear” in the sense that there are thresholds of importance like the one mentioned above built into it. Structurally similar phenomena are well-known from the area of human preferences.²⁸ I might prefer car B to car A because B has some nice extras for a bit (but not too much) more money.

²⁸ See Tversky 1969; Fishburn 1991; the discussion between Hughes 1980, Lee 1984, Philips 1989 and Rawling 1990 as well as, more recently, Temkin 2012.

Similarly, I might prefer car C to car B because C has some further nice extras for another additional (but not too substantial) amount of money. However, I might not prefer C to A and rather prefer A to C because now the difference in price has passed some threshold and outweighs the niceties of the additional extras.

A similar point and argument can be made for the relation (whatever the degree of granularity) of being an equally meaningful life overall; I won't go through the parallels here. The overall conclusion here is that both *more meaningful* and *equally meaningful* fail transitivity. For the sake of simplicity, I have focused on the first relation here. Given the complexities of life, it is very plausible to assume that non-transitive cycles of lives like in our example above are pervasive. It doesn't happen all the time but often enough to raise serious questions about the possibility of ranking lives in terms of their "amount" of meaning. Without transitivity there is no ranking. Even though this kind of failure of transitivity does not entail incomparability (see above) between any two lives, it implies that there cannot be complete determinate rankings of lives with respect to their meaning (even given some fixed degree of granularity). In other words, even though there can be more "local" (perhaps "regional") comparisons there can be no "global" rankings.

In his book, Metz gives the following final detailed statement of his theory: "(FT₃) 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 towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story: in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue."²⁹

Even this more detailed statement of the theory does not indicate any troublesome multi-dimensionality or non-linearity. There is no threat of a lack of transitivity and orthodox ideas of measurement and ranking seem secure in the case of the meanings of lives (and their parts). However, if the remarks in this section are correct, one would have to modify Metz' view in the relevant ways.

²⁹ Metz 2013, 235.

4. Conclusion: How then to Think about the Meaning of Life?

There are thus two basic limitations to the possibility of ranking lives with respect to meaning: one from indeterminacy (section 1) and one from failure of transitivity (section 2). What are the implications of all this for the way we can or should think about the meaning of life?

It is not ruled out in principle by anything said so far that there could still be one maximally meaningful life or one group of lives each of which is more meaningful than any life not in that group. However, one should be skeptical of such an idea and of the idea that this could be the case. Couldn't there always be indeterminacy or a cycle of non-transitivity even among the most meaningful lives? It thus seems like a good idea to give up on the idea of "maximizing meaning". There simply might not be such a thing as a maximum here. Metz, however, seems to accept the idea of a maximum, for instance when he talks about "the most degree of meaning".³⁰

However, if the idea of maximizing meaning is as problematic as I am suggesting here, then we should rather take a leaf out of the book of satisficing views.³¹ What matters is whether a given life is meaningful, that is, passes the (vague) threshold between meaning and the lack thereof. Enough is enough, and also good enough. The idea of getting more and ever more out of life or the idea of get the most meaning into and out of it are misleading and seriously unrealistic. If acknowledging this makes for modesty, then we are better and best off with such modesty.

Metz points out, again and again, that the notion of a meaningful life is an evaluative one.³² Different basic axiological views lead to different views about meaning then. I propose to give up on certain ideas implicit or explicit in Metz' account: ideas of strict measurement, unrestricted comparability, additive aggregation, and global rankings. But this does not mean that one would have to give up on Metz' account of meaning as a whole. On the contrary, I would propose to modify the view in the relevant ways in order to make it even stronger.

³⁰ Metz 2013, 158.

³¹ See in general: Simon 1983; Slote 1989; Schwartz 2004.

³² Metz 2013, 6, *passim*.

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Is Meaning in Life Comparable?

From the Viewpoint of ‘The Heart of Meaning in Life’

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to propose a new approach to the question of meaning in life by criticizing Thaddeus Metz’s objectivist theory in his book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. I propose the concept of “the heart of meaning in life,” which alone can answer the question, “Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?” and I demonstrate that “the heart of meaning in life” cannot be compared, in principle, with other people’s meaning in life. The answer to the question of “the heart of meaning in life” ought to have two values, yes-or-no, and there is no ambiguous gray zone between them. I believe that this concept constitutes the very central content of meaning in life.

1. Introduction

In Federico Fellini’s 1954 film, *La Strada*, the Fool encourages Gelsomina, a young female member of a circus troupe who has little talent, little skill, and little social value.

THE FOOL: You may not believe it, but everything that exists in the world has some purpose. Here . . . take . . . that pebble there, for instance.

GELSOMINA: Which pebble?

THE FOOL: Oh . . . this one, any one of them . . . Well . . . even this serves some purpose . . . even this little pebble.

GELSOMINA: And what purpose does it serve?

THE FOOL: It . . . but how do I know? If I knew, do you know who I’d be?

GELSOMINA: Who?

THE FOOL: God Almighty who knows everything. When you’re born, when you’ll die. Who else could know that? No . . . I don’t know what purpose this pebble serves, but it must serve some purpose. Because if it is useless, then everything is useless . . . even stars. . . . At least that’s what I

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think. And even you . . . even you serve some purpose . . . with that artichoke head of yours.¹

In this sequence, the Fool stresses his idea that everything in the universe serves some purpose no matter how useless or worthless it may look, although no one can exactly know what purpose it may serve. It is only God that knows it. He says, “If it [this pebble] is useless, then everything is useless.”

I do not believe in God, but the Fool’s words eloquently explain my personal sentiment on meaning in life, which is in sharp contrast with Thaddeus Metz’s objectivist approach in his book, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*. In this paper, I criticize his objectivist approach to meaning in life and instead propose my own argument using the concept of “the heart of meaning in life.”

2. Metz’s Interpretation of Meaning in Life and its Problems

Metz classifies theories of meaning in life into two categories, namely, supernaturalism and naturalism. The former is the view that meaning in life should be interpreted in relationship to a spiritual realm, and the latter is the view that meaning in life can be acquired in a purely physical world.² The latter, naturalism, is further divided into two categories, namely, subjectivism and objectivism. Subjectivism is the view that meaning in life can be acquired by obtaining the objects of one’s “propositional attitudes,” and objectivism is the view that one’s life is meaningful “in itself” at least in part regardless of one’s propositional attitudes.³

Metz defends objectivism. He calls his idea “the fundamentality theory.” The basic idea of his fundamentality theory is described as follows.

A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.⁴

Metz argues that fundamental conditions of human existence can be interpreted

¹ Bondanella and Gieri, p.121.

² Metz, p.19, p.79.

³ Metz, pp.164-165.

⁴ Metz, p.222.

in terms of the good, the true, and the beautiful. For example, Mandela and Mother Teresa tried hard to improve devastated people's fundamental living conditions; scientific discoveries by Einstein and Darwin contributed much to the progress of fundamental knowledge of humans and the universe; and Picasso and Dostoyevsky's works lead our eyes to the most fundamental layer of the world of the beautiful.⁵ Their lives are all meaningful because they oriented their rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence on the level of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

The final version of his fundamentality theory 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 towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such as that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue.⁶

This statement is composed of two parts: the part dealing with fundamental conditions of human existence and the part dealing with one's life-story. Metz claims, with regard to the former, that the life in which one orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence is more meaningful than the life in which one does not orient it towards them and, with regard to the latter, the life which exhibits narrative value is more meaningful than the life which exhibits narrative disvalue.

Let us see an impressive example that Metz uses in his book. He stresses that great meaning is conferred, intuitively, on the lives of Mandela and Mother Teresa.

In contrast, their lives would not have been notably important had they striven to ensure that everyone's toenails were regularly trimmed or that no one suffered from bad breath, even if these conditions were universally

⁵ Metz, pp.227-233.

⁶ Metz, p.235.

desired (or needed!). Why are the former plausible candidates for substantial significance, while the latter are not?⁷

Here he concludes that the actual lives of Mandela and Mother Teresa are more meaningful than the hypothetical lives which are made up solely of trimming toenails or preventing bad breath.

Concerning the life-story, Metz suggests that the lives in which “its bad parts cause its later, good parts” by virtue of “personal growth or some other pattern that makes for a compelling life-story that is original,” are more meaningful than the lives which are solely “repetitive,” “end on a low note,” or “intend to replicate another’s whole-life.”⁸

One of the most basic presumptions of Metz’s objectivism is that we can compare one’s meaning in life with the other, by observing their lives from the outside, and can reach the conclusion that one life is more meaningful than the other. I have grave doubts about this way of thinking.

Let us go back to the dialogue in the film *La Strada*. The central message there was that every life has meaning no matter what social value it may have. After having seen the film, many viewers would think that the life of Gelsomina, which was the continuance of a series of small events and ended in tragedy, was, indeed, full of dignity and divinity, comparable to those of sacred religious figures. Gelsomina did nothing to orient her rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, and the tone of her life became dimmer and dimmer toward the tragic end point. Hence, according to Metz’s fundamentality theory her life should be considered to have very little meaning compared with Mandela or Mother Teresa, however, many of us would probably have just the opposite impression. For the viewers, Gelsomina *is* Mandela or Mother Teresa. The life of a person of no importance can have equal meaning to the life of a distinguished person. Something strange is happening here. We might call it “the dialectic of meaning in life.” This, however, is no more than my personal impression of the central message of the film. In the following paragraphs I am going to translate it into more theoretical language.

In Metz’s fundamentality theory, “meaning in life” can be interpreted as the significance of socially and narratively valuable life. By the words “socially

⁷ Metz, p.227.

⁸ Metz, p.235.

valuable life”⁹ I mean a life in which one positively orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence. According to his final prescription, the more social and narrative value a person’s life has, the more her life becomes meaningful.

Let us consider the life of Gelsomina. We can ask, “Is it possible that the life of Gelsomina has a great meaning despite the fact that her life was actually one without any social or narrative value?,” and answer this question positively. If this is correct, Metz’s interpretation of meaning in life in his final prescription should be considered to be wrong.

If we look into the world of literature and religious texts we can easily find many stories in which the life of a person without any social or narrative value is depicted as having tremendous meaning at the deepest spiritual level. This shows that people have never limited meaning in life to a person’s social or narrative value, and in some cases they have found great meaning in other characteristics such as sincerity, faithfulness, or industriousness. I dare say that the life of a person can have grave and utmost meaning even if it is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or the prevention of bad breath.

Let us consider the lives of Mandela or Mother Teresa. Interestingly, it is possible to imagine a situation in which they ask themselves, “Is my life meaningful despite the fact that my life has been socially and narratively valuable to the fullest degree?,” and then they respond negatively to this question. For example, it is possible for them to “think” that their lives are completely meaningless because they had an experience of telling a lie, only once in their life, to their beloved friend, although their lives have been full of social and narrative value. This shows that meaning in life is not logically equal to social and narrative value (because if they are logically equal it should be that it is incorrect to “think” in that way). The important point is that even Mandela or Mother Teresa are able to doubt the meaning of their own lives, and those who advocate Metz’s theory of meaning in life should “correct” their doubt by saying, “Oh, your doubt is wrong. Your life ought to be meaningful according to our theory!”

Even a person whose life fully satisfies Metz’s fundamentality theory is able to legitimately doubt the meaningfulness of their own life. Here lies the most essential characteristic of the concept of meaning in life.

⁹ This is not Metz’s phrase but mine.

In this section, we have demonstrated that Metz's fundamentality theory fails to grasp the meaningfulness of Gelsomina's life. In the following sections, I will leave Gelsomina's case and inquiry into a much deeper dimension of meaning in life.

3. The Heart of Meaning in Life

First, I would like to explain my understanding of the concept of "meaning in life." When we talk about meaning in life, we do not necessarily or solely talk about a person's social and narrative value. In many cases, our question of meaning in life takes a form similar to the following.

Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?

I believe that what is asked or lamented in the above question constitutes the very central content of meaning in life. I want to call it "the heart of meaning in life." This question emerges from the deep layer of my heart when I notice that the solid psychological ground which was supporting the affirmative basis of my life has suddenly collapsed or disappeared into nothing. The most important point here is that the words "my life" in this question point to the life of oneself, that is to say, the life of a person who is now writing this text, or the life of a person who is now reading this text. "My life" means the life of myself who is now writing this text, and "my life" also means the life of the reader of this text, that is to say, the life of "yourself," my dear reader! *You* are supposed to pose this question, "Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?" This is not a general question which can be equally applied to anyone. This is the question that can only be applied to the life of myself when it is uttered by me, or to the life of yourself when it is uttered by you. This can be extended to the life of him/herself when the question is uttered by him/her.

A question about "the heart of meaning in life" is completely different from a general question about the meaning in life, such as, "What is meaning in life in general?" A question about "the heart of meaning in life" is to be answered, in principle, only by the person who uttered it. There is no general answer to a question about "the heart of meaning in life" that is equally applied to everyone. Furthermore, it is very important to understand the following distinction. Generally speaking, we can say that a question about "the heart of meaning in

life” can be answered by the person who uttered it, whereas in the case of the reader of this text, it is only for your own actual life that you can legitimately talk about “the heart of meaning in life.” Only for the life one has actually lived and is going to live, can one talk about “the heart of meaning in life” and, in the case of the reader, it is for your own life that you can talk about it. Let us keep this in mind and delve deeper into this topic.

Metz often says that the life of Mandela or Mother Teresa has significant meaning because they positively oriented their rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence. We have to pay special attention here to the fact that Metz does not talk about “the heart of meaning in life” because Metz, himself, is neither Mandela nor Mother Teresa, that is to say, he is living the life neither of Mandela nor of Mother Teresa. Metz is talking about the meaning in life of persons other than himself. Metz can talk about “the heart of meaning in life” only when he refers to Metz’s own actual life. This is the logical conclusion that is derived from the concept of “the heart of meaning in life.” And we should note that throughout his book, Metz never talks about “the heart of meaning in life.” From my viewpoint, Metz fails to discuss the most important aspect of meaning in life in his academic discussion of this topic. His philosophical analysis has not yet reached the layer that I want to make most clear.

Metz might classify my position under a certain type of subjectivism but I think this is wrong because subjectivists, in Metz’s sense, do not also talk about “the heart of meaning in life.” According to Metz, subjectivism is the view that meaning in life can be acquired by the acquisition of the objects of one’s “propositional attitudes.” It is clear that in this kind of subjectivism “we” can talk about “his” or “her” meaning in life by referring to their acquisition of the objects of their propositional attitudes. However, this is not what “the heart of meaning in life” really points to because “the heart of meaning in life” of his or her life can only be legitimately talked about by him/herself, not by us. Hence, my position is not even subjectivism in Metz’s sense.

For instance, Metz describes a dominant form of subjectivism as follows.

(S₁) A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she obtains the objects of her actual pro-attitudes such as desires and goals.¹⁰

¹⁰ Metz, p.169.

In this sentence Metz talks about someone else's meaning in life. This shows that what Metz is talking about is, by definition, never "the heart of meaning in life."¹¹ Metz discussed subjectivism throughout Chapter Nine, but my position in this paper is not dealt with in any pages in that chapter.

And it is crystal clear that my position is not supernaturalism because I do not have any religious belief. Metz's classification of meaning in life fails to catch "the heart of meaning in life" in my sense.

Of course, it is possible for Mandela or Mother Teresa to utter, "Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?" In this case, their question is without doubt one about "the heart of meaning in life." However, when we ask "Does the life of Mandela or Mother Teresa have any meaning at all?," we completely fail to pose the question about "the heart of meaning in life" for Mandela or Mother Teresa.

It is true that as a result of the accomplishments of Mandela and Mother Teresa many people's fundamental living conditions were dramatically improved. In this sense we sometimes say their lives had great meaning and this makes sense in our ordinary language. But it is important to know that here "the heart of meaning in life" in Mandela or Mother Teresa is never being talked about. It is made possible only when they themselves talk about meaning in their own actual life.

In the same vein, I can talk about "the heart of meaning in life" only when I talk about the meaning in my own actual life. However, at the same time, my judgment on meaning in life will be attained under the strong influence of the state of the human relationships that surround me. For example, whether I was able to make my friends and/or my family happy would play a crucial role in evaluating meaning in my life. Hence, whilst it is only I who can legitimately talk about "the heart of meaning in life" in the case of myself, it is human relationships and broader contexts surrounding me that strongly assist in determining the evaluation of meaning in my life.

Let us turn our eyes to "my counterfactual life." Is it possible for me to talk about "the heart of meaning in life" in my counterfactual life? For example, it makes sense to say, "if I were a billionaire, my life would be tremendously meaningful," but I must say that in this case I fail to talk about "the heart of meaning in life." The reason for this is as follows.

¹¹ The same holds true of S₂ and S₃. Metz, pp.176-179.

As was discussed earlier, “the heart of meaning in life” refers to what is asked or lamented in the question, “Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?” Here we have to pay special attention to the phrase “my life like this.” This phrase clearly means “my *actual* life like *this*,” not “my *counterfactual* life like *that*.” Hence, when I talk about “the heart of meaning in life” I must be talking about my actual life like this, not my counterfactual life like that. When I am talking about meaning in life in my counterfactual life in which I am a billionaire, I am not answering the question, “Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?” because in my actual life I am not a billionaire; I am no more than an upper-middle-class college teacher. It is only when I talk about my actual life in which I am an upper-middle-class worker that I can talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in the life of myself. Of course, it makes sense for me to say, “if I were a billionaire, my life would be tremendously meaningful,” but in using this sentence I can only mean something other than “the heart of meaning in life” that we have been discussing so far.

Then what about meaning in my life in the past? Is it possible for me to talk about “the heart of meaning in life” as of my life one year ago? Before thinking about this question, let us examine what the phrase “my life like this” means in a strict sense. In this phrase, “this” means my actual life, and my actual life is the life I am experiencing here and now which is made possible by the accumulation of what I have experienced up until the present. I can talk about “the heart of meaning in life” solely in respect of my life of this kind. Hence, it is now clear that in the case of my life in the past I cannot talk about “the heart of meaning in life” because “my life like this” is not the phrase that denotes a certain time-point in life in the past. Of course, it makes sense to say, “if I were the person that I was one year ago, my life would be more meaningful than this,” but this is not the sentence which stands for “the heart of meaning in life” one year ago in my life. According to this line of thought, we can also conclude that I cannot talk about “the heart of meaning in life” for my life in the future.

It might be helpful here to refer to Theo van Willigenburg’s concept of “an internalist view on the value of life.” According to van Willigenburg, the goodness of life is “in some sense always related to what is, or could be, experienced as valuable by the person who is leading that life,” and the important thing is “not whether others value these goods, but whether I value

them from *my* perspective.”¹² At first sight, his argument looks similar to mine; however, he believes that the goodness of a person’s life cannot be determined only by that person’s self-judgment. Hence, whilst he uses the term “internalist,” he actually supports the idea that the value of one’s life is determined both by one’s own internal judgment and by the external facts and/or contexts. He concludes that “my internalist position rejects the experience requirement posed by experiential subjectivism.”¹³ His discussion is complicated and twisted because he does not clearly distinguish between the concepts of value, goodness, and meaning. It seems to me that although the value and goodness of one’s life cannot be determined only by one’s inner judgment, with regard to “the heart of meaning in life,” it ought to be determined in a purely internalist fashion, that is, only by the judgment of the person who is leading that life.

What I am arguing is not that objective approaches are totally senseless, but that although objective approaches can accurately explain some ordinary usages of the words “meaning in life,” they can never grasp the layer of “the heart of meaning in life” we have discussed so far.

Metz criticizes “first-person” approaches to meaning in life because most of us “are concerned about whether, say, the lives of our spouses and children are meaningful, and not merely because the meaning of our own life might depend on the meaningfulness of theirs.”¹⁴ Of course I understand what he wants to say, and I agree with him that in our ordinary life we usually think like that. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that the “meaningfulness” in Metz’s words is something completely different from “the heart of meaning in life” in our sense. I can never talk about the meaningfulness of my spouse’s life or my children’s lives at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

4. “The Heart of Meaning in Life” Cannot Be Compared

An important conclusion is to be derived from the above discussion, that is, it is totally impossible to compare “the heart of meaning in life” among people. Meaning in life is incomparable at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

First, it is impossible to compare my “meaning in life” with other’s “meaning in life” at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” The reason is

¹² van Willigenburg, p.27. *Italic by van Willigenburg.*

¹³ van Willigenburg, p.29.

¹⁴ Metz, p.3, note 3.

simple. It is impossible to talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in the life of others, and hence, it is logically impossible to compare it with mine. Metz writes in his book that, “For all I know, my life is, so far, more pleasurable than Emily Dickinson’s was, but less meaningful than Albert Einstein’s.”¹⁵ I understand that here he is talking about his version of the objective interpretation of meaning in life. If he were talking about “the heart of meaning in life” in my sense, what he is talking about would be total nonsense.

Second, it is impossible to compare someone’s “meaning in life” with another’s “meaning in life” at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” I cannot talk about “the heart of meaning in life” in the life of others, hence, it is logically impossible to compare them. It is logically impossible for me to compare Metz’s “meaning in life” with Einstein’s “meaning in life” at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” It is also logically impossible for me to compare Mandela or Mother Teresa’s “meaning in life” with that of an ordinary, mediocre person at that level.

Third, it is impossible to compare “meaning in life” in my actual life with “meaning in life” in my counterfactual life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” The reason for this was explained earlier. This may be one of the important points that distinguishes my theory from other subjectivist ones.

The above discussion shows that “the heart of meaning in life” in my life cannot be compared with anything at all. This means that it is impossible to say that meaning in my life is greater or lesser than meaning in some other life when we are talking about “the heart of meaning in life.” It transcends all comparisons.

This means that it is completely wrong for me to answer the question, “Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all?” in a form such as “my life has a greater meaning than such and such” or “my life has a lesser meaning than such and such.” The only possible answer will be either “my life has meaning” or “my life does not have meaning.” The answer ought to be one of two values, a binary yes-or-no, black-or-white, and there is no ambiguous gray zone between the above two answers. This may sound counter-intuitive, but if any comparisons are to be prohibited at the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” this should be the only conclusion to this matter. It exists, or it does not exist. There is no third answer between them. What is questioned here is not the

¹⁵ Metz, p.63.

question of comparison or degree, but the question of existence. We are now in the realm of ontology.

Of course, it sometimes happens to me that I cannot provide this kind of yes-or-no answer to the question of “the heart of meaning in life,” but this is not a big problem. What I argue here is that if I can actually answer the question, my answer will have to take the yes-or-no style. An interesting conclusion derived from this is that if I feel that my life has even just a bit meaning, then it means my life has complete, fullest meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” If I am thinking a bit like that, fullest meaning has already been endowed to me. It is only when I think that my life does not have any meaning at all that I am allowed to say that my life does not have meaning. It seems to me that there is an interesting asymmetry between the existence and non-existence of meaning in life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

You may think that I am comparing “existence of meaning” and “non-existence of meaning” whilst I am arguing that meaning in life cannot be compared, and because this is an apparent contradiction, my reasoning is totally wrong. I do not necessarily think so. This is closely connected with the discussion of anti-natalism. For example, I can say that I exist now, and this makes sense, but when I say this I do not necessarily compare my existence with my non-existence. It is very hard, or almost impossible, to imagine what it really means that I do not exist now. Of course I can “think” about a possible world in which I do not exist whilst other things do exist, however, it is impossible to “imagine” what that possible world looks like in a strict sense because in that possible world the subject, this *I*, who can perceive that possible world from the inside, does not exist at all. In order to compare two possible worlds I must be able to imagine what they look like; therefore, it is impossible to compare the world in which I exist with the possible world in which I do not exist.¹⁶ We have to completely distinguish imagining from thinking.

If this reasoning is correct, then the same thing can hold true in the case of meaning in life. When I talk about the existence of meaning in life, I do not compare it with the non-existence of meaning in life. No comparison is needed in talking about meaning in life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” I understand that this discussion requires a more sophisticated and detailed analysis to be undertaken elsewhere.

¹⁶ This is one of the main reasons why David Benatar’s argument is considered to be wrong. See my forthcoming paper.

It seems to me that to answer “yes” to the question of “the heart of meaning in life” is to give affirmation to the whole process of my life up until the present. This suggests that “the heart of meaning in life” can be talked about for one’s whole life up until the present, not for one’s part life in the past.¹⁷ This should further lead to “birth affirmation,” saying yes to the fact that I have been born into this world. In contrast, to answer “no” to the question is to negate the whole process of my life and this will lead to “birth negation,” saying no to the fact that I have been born, that is to say, “better never to have been.” Here the philosophy of meaning in life gets connected with the philosophy of birth affirmation, which I have been inquiring into in recent years.¹⁸

In the previous section I argued that the life of Gelsomina can have a great meaning despite the fact that her life was actually one without any social or narrative value, and, in some cases, the life of a person can have grave and utmost meaning even if it is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing. Metz criticizes this way of thinking. Remember Metz’s words: “[T]heir lives would not have been notably important had they striven to ensure that everyone’s toenails were regularly trimmed or that no one suffered from bad breath, even if these conditions were universally desired (or needed!).” Here let us think deeply about the above case from the viewpoint of “the heart of meaning in life.”

First, imagine the life of mine that is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing. You may think that such a life does not have any meaning at all. Nevertheless, this is not my actual life. This is my counterfactual life. Hence, I can never make a judgment on this kind of counterfactual life of mine at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.”

Second, imagine the life of a third person that is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing. As we discussed earlier, it is impossible to talk about other people’s meaning in life at the level of “the heart of meaning in life.” The situation is the same as in the first case. I have to say Metz’s words above appear to be totally senseless from our viewpoint.

Third, imagine a case in which a person whose life is made up of a repeated routine of toenail trimming or bad breath preventing says that “my life has a significant meaning at the level of ‘the heart of meaning in life’.” What should

¹⁷ I am going to discuss this topic, by referring to Chapter Three of Metz’s book, in my forthcoming paper.

¹⁸ For example, see Morioka (2011).

we think of this person's words? I believe that all we have to do is to accept the words as they are and never say that they are right or wrong. We should refrain from saying that such a life has lesser meaning than Mandela or Mother Teresa, or that such a life does not have much meaning at all. The same thing can be said about a person who is no more than just alive and whose life is nothing more than that.

There remains a question on which we have to make a deliberate consideration. That is the question of whether the life of those who deeply injure others should also be considered, in some cases, to have meaning at the level of "the heart of meaning in life." Let us consider the life of Hitler as an extreme example. First, it is possible to imagine a case in which my life is just the same as Hitler's, but this is the case of my counterfactual life and my actual life is completely different from it, hence, I cannot talk about meaning in this hypothetical case at the level of "the heart of meaning in life."

Second, then, what about my actual life? I have to say that in my actual life I have injured and afflicted many people, and even now I might be letting someone suffer from what I am doing to him/her. In such a life of mine, can I say that my life has meaning at the level of "the heart of meaning in life" in spite of the above fact? It is extremely difficult to draw a definite conclusion for this case, but I believe that I am able to answer yes to this question. This is made possible only when I sincerely review the injury and suffering I have done to others, and only when I think deeply about how I am going to rework my relationship with them, and only when I think deeply about how I am going to make relationships with others whom I encounter in the future.

Third, what if someone like Hitler says that his life is full of meaning at the level of "the heart of meaning in life"? He would say that what he has done to people has significant meaning because he has successfully flourished in a way of life which no one other than him can ever accomplish in human history, and hence, even if what he has done to people has been nothing but a series of grave injuries and suffering, his life should be considered to have significant meaning at the level of "the heart of meaning in life." Many people would feel disgusted and nauseated hearing his words, and, emotionally speaking, I too feel like giving him a slap on the cheek. However, interestingly, if he is talking about his own "heart of meaning in life, there are no mistakes in the use of the words "meaning in life" in his argument. Hence, no matter how hard it is for us to accept his words, all we have to do is to accept them as they are, and we have to

refrain from affirming or negating his argument on meaning in life. If we criticize him and say, “your life has no meaning at all,” these words should be considered totally wrong as long as they are said about “the heart of meaning in life.” We have to keep in mind that here lies the true uniqueness of the concept of “the heart of meaning in life.”

Following that, we have to criticize him and argue that his whole life is *ethically* wrong and is never *ethically* justified. We have to say to him that a life of afflicting a great number of people should be ethically negated and should never again happen in this world. Although “the heart of meaning in life” and “goodness or evilness of life” are interconnected, the level of “meaning” and the level of “goodness/badness” should be clearly separated from each other in their ontological status. With regard to others’ lives, we cannot make a judgment on the former, but we can do it on the latter.

Then, if there is a recreational drug user/addict whose life has never been improved, and he has never tried to improve the fundamental conditions in our society, but is fully satisfied with his life from the bottom of his heart, can we say that his life has meaning? From a common sense view, we would say that such a life does not have much meaning, but strictly speaking, if he himself believes that his life is full of meaning at the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” we cannot affirm or negate his words and all we have to do is just accept his opinion about his meaning in life as it is stated. Of course I will never recommend such a life to others and I will argue that one’s life free from such drug addiction would be by far the better life. Nevertheless, at the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” I dare say that we ought to refrain from judging the meaning in life of others from the outside and just accept their words as they are.

Let us go back to Gelsomina’s case. We pointed out that whilst most of us would find meaning in Gelsomina’s life, Metz’s fundamentality theory cannot find so much meaning in her life because she did not try to orient her rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

Then, what does the theory of “the heart of meaning in life” say about Gelsomina’s life? The answer is already clear. At the level of “the heart of meaning in life,” we cannot talk about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of Gelsomina’s life, nor can we compare it with that of another person’s life. What Gelsomina did was just to live her “miserable” life honestly and sincerely. The meaning of Gelsomina’s life transcends all of us at the level of its heart.

In this paper I have demonstrated that there exists “the heart of meaning in

life,” a layer that cannot be compared with anything, in the layers of the question of meaning in life. I believe that this layer constitutes the very central content of meaning in life because the question of meaning in life becomes a most pure and painful one, not when it is posed in an objective form, but when it is posed and directed toward your own actual, irreplaceable life.

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Agreement and Sympathy On Metz's *Meaning in Life*

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that we can appreciate the real worth of Thaddeus Metz's recent book *Meaning in Life* just by regarding it as the product of his existential struggle in our endless quest for life's meaning. In other words, we could not understand in what respect Metz's work is valuable if we read it from the purely analytical-theoretical perspective. My paper is, therefore, meant to challenge the idea of 'analytic study on meaningfulness'. My general suggestion is that the analytic philosophers should go beyond their narrow theoretical concerns when they tackle the philosophical problem about life's meaning, because, I argue, what fundamentally matters in our perennial conversation on life's meaning is, not our universal agreement about the view on the condition for a life's being meaningful, but rather our mutual encouragement in devoting our lives to various meaningful activities. I suggest, particularly, that Metz's philosophical investigation is in fact piloted by his deep practical-existential concern to make his own life meaningful, and so we should not be preoccupied with his overt theoretical interests when we read the book in question. We should rather pay a significant amount of attention to how much the author cares about his own life's meaning in dedicating himself to the philosophical study on meaningfulness, because we would thereby be in a position to say that the real worth of Metz's study should consist in encouraging and enabling us to cherish a hope for making our own lives more meaningful by undertaking the philosophical search for life's meaning.

1. Introduction

One of my general suggestions is that there are at least two ways to read an analytic philosopher's theoretical writings about the issue of meaningfulness. One of them, schematically, can be dubbed 'the way of reading from the detached standpoint' and the other 'the way of reading from a fellow's standpoint'. They differ from each other in important respects, as we will see later. I would like to suggest, therefore, that it is a significant matter to decide in which way we should read Thaddeus Metz's analytic-philosophical study, *Meaning in Life*.

Among the goals of this paper is to develop the point of what is quite

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roughly presented in the last paragraph. Anticipating what I'm going to argue, I would say here that we cannot appreciate the so-called 'real worth' of Metz's book if we take it for a work of the purely theoretical kind and evaluate it according to a quasi-scientific or quasi-mathematical standard. We can really appreciate its worth, rather, just by regarding it as the product of his existential struggle in our endless quest for life's meaning. This is what I suggest. However, how can I suggest that? Or, more fundamentally, what does my suggestion mean? I will answer these questions step by step.

Before proceeding into the main subject, I should explain in what respect my suggestion is significant. At the opening stage of *Meaning in Life*, Metz manifests that the aim of his study is to find the best theory which explains under what condition a life would be meaningful, as we will see soon. In reading the book in question, therefore, we understandably tend to focus on theoretical points, e.g., about whether the proposed theory is adequately justified. I do not want to say that such theoretical issues are trifles. However, if what I am going to suggest is right, those points turn out to be subsidiary in the sense that there exists a more important matter which is essential to grasp how valuable Metz's work is. One of the consequences from my suggestion is, then, that in order to get some crucial point of the book in question we must go beyond the purely theoretical concerns although these follow the natural reaction to the impartial, specialized style of writing Metz has adopted in his study.

The general purpose of this paper is to develop my idea about what kind of concerns we should have when we tackle the philosophical problems about the meaning of life. I will argue that there is a certain distortion within Metz's concern guiding his thinking in the book in question. I remark, however, that my intention is not to blame the author for lacking a right kind of interests. I will, rather, finally show that a hiding type of concern piloting Metz's intellectual journey gives his work the essential depth without which it would be crucially shallow and unattractive.

The main part of this paper is divided into three sections. In Section 2, I explain how I read *Meaning in Life*. I thereby introduce what I think to be the central points of the book in question to the readers of this paper. In Section 3, I criticize Metz's theoretical position for suffering from a fatal fault. In Section 4, I nevertheless suggest that his book has a certain excellence, which I would like to name 'value for the fellow-seekers of the meaning of life'.

2. Argumentation, Method, and Theory in *Meaning in Life*

In this section, by referring to the relevant passages of *Meaning in Life*, I will introduce Metz's theory of meaningfulness and explain how he argues for it. To do so, I will shed special light on the author's method according to which he seeks the best theory of life's meaning, because we would thereby be in a position to understand accurately in what respect his investigation is problematic, as we will see in Section 3.

In what follows, I firstly outline Metz's argumentation towards the theory which he thinks would best explain the condition of life's meaning, and secondly explain what sort of a theory he has finally reached. I remark that my discourse in this section is meant to devote itself to the *objective* kind of presentation of Metz's view in the sense that I try to concentrate just on describing what the author suggests and postpone the critical scrutiny about it till the next section.

2.1

The silhouette of Metz's argumentation is simple and distinct. He divides the extant views about meaningfulness into three mutually excluded types, *i.e.*, supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism, while the latter two are subtypes of naturalism; he then searches for the best theory of the topics in question by considering the merits and demerits of each of the three rival views; and he finally judges a particular theory of the objectivist kind to be "the most defensible, given the current state of the academic literature."¹

Before going into the details, we must look through the definitions of terms. In the author's terminology, supernaturalism claims that "one's existence is significant just insofar as one has a certain relation with some spiritual realm," and naturalism denies it; among the naturalist theories, the subjectivist ones are positions "that meaningful conditions vary, depending on the subject," while the objectivist ones are "that certain features of our natural lives can make them meaningful, but not merely by virtue of a positive attitude toward them."²

¹ Metz (2013), p.2. All the citations in this paper are from Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. I refer to it by 'Metz 2013'.

² Metz (2013), pp.20-21.

Given these definitions, Metz suggests that naturalism is more plausible than supernaturalism, by arguing, *e.g.*, that someone's life can be meaningful without anything supernatural.³ In addition, he suggests that, among the naturalistic views, objectivism is more appealing than subjectivism, by denying that any subjective factor is essential for making one's life meaningful. Less abstractly, it would not be the case that the subjective factor of a person's being mentally attracted to the activities in her life is either sufficient or necessary for her life's being meaningful.⁴ Besides, he rejects several particular theories of the objectivist type, *e.g.*, the 'attractiveness' theory and the utilitarian theory, by claiming that each of them has some fault which had better be corrected.⁵ Finally, by arguing that his so-called "fundamentality theory," *i.e.*, an objectivist theory which supposes *a person's employing his rationality toward the positive enhancement and maintenance of fundamental conditions for human existence* to be relevant to his life's being meaningful, would accommodate all the desiderata for an adequate theory of meaning in life, he concludes that "the fundamentality theory is more justified than its closest rivals and that the theory warrants systematic attempts to make it less vague, more clearly defensible, and more wide-ranging in its application."⁶

Now, I am going to step into the more detailed points, as far as necessary for my consideration in the following sections. Anyone who just read the last paragraph, probably, should be interested in, *e.g.*, how Metz argues that someone's life can be meaningful without anything supernatural. This is one of the issues essentially relevant to the question of whether the author's concluding suggestion is adequately justified, because, quite roughly, the structure of his argumentation requires that, if the precedent rejection of supernaturalism fails, then the justificatory procedure toward the fundamentality theory breaks off halfway. I remark that there are at least three crucial steps for reaching the book's goal, *i.e.*, steps of (1) rejecting supernaturalism, (2) rejecting subjectivism, and (3) rejecting rival theories of the objectivist type. If we are theoretically concerned about if Metz has justifiably supported his view, we should – metaphorically speaking – check whether he has succeeded in running up all the steps (1) to (3) or fallen down at some of them.

³ Metz (2013), pp.142-146.

⁴ Metz (2013), pp.175, 183-184.

⁵ Metz (2013), ch.10 and ch.11.

⁶ Metz (2013), p.239.

I am going to introduce the way in which Metz rebuts subjectivism (or exactly some simple type of subjectivism), because to do so will enable us to conceive his *general method*, which he follows in constructing several important arguments in his book. I will, in the next section, critically consider how this method works and suggest that it doesn't contribute to any 'objective' judgment about whether a given theory is universally acceptable.

Metz's method may be named by the 'method of intuition', because it appeals to something called 'intuition' in the analytic philosophical literature.⁷ Let us see its application, to begin with.

According to the author, as already mentioned, any subjective factor in itself is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for a life's being meaningful. For the insufficiency, Metz argues that we would otherwise have numerous problematic cases. In fact, if, *e.g.*, a person's fulfilling her desire of a certain kind was sufficient for her life's being meaningful, then the lives of persons who wholeheartedly desire to, and actually devote themselves to, harm others, maintain 3,732 hairs on her head, memorize the dictionary, try to make flowers sing, *etc...* could be meaningful. Metz says, however, that these consequences should be "seriously *counterintuitive* implications" of subjectivism.⁸ In other words, he takes it as unacceptable that one's life could be made meaningful, *e.g.*, just by fulfilling one's desire to harm others.

For the un-necessity of subjective factors also, by referring to something he calls 'intuition', Metz develops the following argument.

Consider as well the case of a Mother Teresa who is in stereotypical fashion, doing all she can to alleviate serious pain and heal grave injuries and illness. [...] Suppose that she loved neither the people she helped nor the activity of helping them, that she was not inspired by her work, but instead did it out of fear that she would face eternal damnation for not doing it, that for large period she wondered whether human beings were really worth all the trouble, etc. Even so, *my intuition* is that she would have acquired some meaning in her life simply by virtue of having substantially helped so many needy people.⁹

⁷ For the author's own explanation of his method, cf. Metz (2013), p.8.

⁸ Metz (2013), p.175, italics added.

⁹ Metz (2013), pp.183-184, italics added.

This Mother Teresa, *ex hypothesi*, does not hold any pro-attitude toward those activities which occupy her lifetime to a large amount. According to Metz, however, his intuition tells that her life would be nevertheless meaningful just in virtue of those assisting labors. *Ergo*, he concludes, subjectivism should have a counter-example in respect to its claim that a pro-attitude be necessary for life's meaning.

What I think we ought to note about these arguments is, abstractly, that the so-called intuitions have an important kind of *priority* over theories or principles. The author himself is aware of this point. In fact, he says that

[o]ften my premises include what I, with the field, call an 'intuition', that is, a judgment of a particular instance of what does or does not confer meaning on life, which judgment is purportedly less controversial than the general principle that is being evaluated in light of it.¹⁰

In other words, intuitions about particular cases come first, and then we search for a theory or general principle that accommodates them. I remark that many arguments in *Meaning in Life*, explicitly or implicitly, follow this methodological order. *E.g.*, as an argument against the supernaturalist theories, he develops the following discourse.

Imagine that only the physical universe, at best known by the scientific method, exists. Now consider whether certain lives could be on balance meaningful, say, those repeatedly invoked here, such as Einstein, Darwin, Dostoyevsky, Picasso, Mandela, and Mother Teresa. Many will respond that they would find these lives to be meaningful in the absence of anything perfect or supernatural.¹¹

I suggest that the author here implicitly appeals to the thing he calls 'intuition'. It's a given premise, *e.g.*, that the actual Mandela's life is meaningful in virtue of his moral activities, independently of any external extra-conditions. Therefore – Metz concludes – supernaturalism, which doesn't accommodate this premise, would be insufficient for an adequate theory of meaningfulness.

¹⁰ Metz (2013), p.8.

¹¹ Metz (2013), p.114.

2.2

By having grasped Metz's general method in *Meaning in Life*, we are now in position to understand the motivational profile of his inquiry in that book. As we have seen, Metz searches for an adequate theory of meaningfulness, which best covers our intuitive judgments about whether given particular lives are meaningful or not. If I cite his own words, Metz searches for "a general principle that entails, and provides a convincing explanation of, the many particular ways in which life can be meaningful."¹² Why, however, does he do so? Why does he suppose it significant to search for such a *theory* about meaningfulness?

Though there is no direct answer to this question found in the book in question, there are relevant words. Noting that "[o]ne could seek to answer the question of what constitute meaning in life by presenting a list of specific ways to do so," Metz says that

[t]he philosophical mind, or at least one major sort of it, seeks more than a list because it seeks order, roughly explanatory unity, amongst diversity. It naturally asks this of a list of meaningful conditions: is there something that all the elements on the list have in common? An answer to this question is what I often call a 'theory' or 'principle' of meaning in life.¹³

This means that, in order to understand the conditions of life's meaning at the philosophical level, one ought not to be content with a list of miscellaneous cases but ought to search for a/the explanation unifying them. I suggest that we should agree with Metz about the point that just enumeration of specific cases never contributes to deepening our understanding of the matter. In short, a list cannot reach philosophical understanding. Therefore, we philosophers need something more than a list. And, according to Metz, what we need is a theory which unifies the particular items.

I note that this motivational profile of Metz's inquiry carries with it a presupposition orienting it toward a certain direction. In fact – as the last two

¹² Metz (2013), p.7.

¹³ Metz (2013), pp.6-7.

citations suggest too – his investigation starts from the factual judgment that there *actually* exist many ways in which lives can be meaningful. Concretely, Metz repeatedly takes several actual human lives, *i.e.*, Mandela’s, Mother Teresa’s, Einstein’s, Darwin’s, Picasso’s and Dostoyevsky’s, for typical instances of lives with great meaning.¹⁴ In brief, according to Metz, we would already have a certain list enumerating particular items (while this does not mean that we have known exactly what is recorded in it). What Metz aims at in that book, thus, would be to find an inclusive principle which would accommodate all the (or sufficiently many) items mentioned in that list he think we have.

Motivated by the wish for attaining such unifying explication, Metz considers which type of a theory, among those three rivals, *i.e.*, supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism, would inclusively explain the particular cases of meaningful lives. He thereby specifies several “desiderata for an attractive theory” of meaningfulness.¹⁵ If I cite some of them, *e.g.*, Desideratum #1 claims that “an attractive theory of meaning in life ought to account for the respect in which supernatural conditions could add meaning, even if they are not necessary for it,” and #5 that that theory “ought to account for the intuition that certain kinds of particularly degrading behaviour undercut the meaning-conferring power of the good consequences that they bring about.” Metz then argues that the fundamentality theory, *i.e.*, the theory which has the following statement (FT1) as its core idea, satisfies all the desiderata he specifies.

(FT1) A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.¹⁶

Since this paper is not meant to consider whether the fundamentality theory is true or not (it is rather going to focus on the author’s way of consideration), we do not need to step into the detailed points, *e.g.*, whether it really satisfies each desideratum. I just quickly explain Metz’s own understanding about how the theory in question works.

Metz says, “intuitively, great meaning was conferred on Mandela’s life by

¹⁴ Metz (2013), pp.4-5.

¹⁵ Metz (2013), pp.220-222.

¹⁶ Metz (2013), p.222.

virtue of having sacrificed so much to overcome apartheid and on Mother Teresa's life by virtue of having acted so compassionately with respect to large number of people in wretched conditions" and the fundamentality theory, he suggests, appropriately explains why it's the case. The point is that both Mandela's political activities and Mother Teresa's medical assistances would be of the moral form of using one's rationality for obtaining and maintaining the condition under which human beings can live as human. Metz's idea is, in brief, that devoting oneself to this kind of use of rationality or akin makes one's life meaningful. In addition, quite roughly, the fundamental conditions under which we can live as human beings, in contrast to mere animals, have an essential relationship not only with the moral, but also with the alethic or epistemic and with the esthetic. Therefore – while I omit detailed explanations – the fundamentality theory would nicely explain why Einstein's, Darwin's, Picasso's and Dostoyevsky's lives are each meaningful.

I would like to suggest that Metz's idea, *i.e.*, the idea that the lives promoting the fundamental human condition are typically meaningful, is very understandable, because we sometimes think that Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Picasso, or other great women and men, lived more meaningful lives (in some sense) than ordinary persons.¹⁷ I'd like to say that Metz's fundamentality theory would adequately explain and accommodate this type of thought.

3. Critical Scrutiny of Meaning in Life

In this section, I will consider whether Metz's work is successful at the *theoretical* level, so to speak. More concretely, I will scrutinize whether the author has successfully reached his theoretical goal of finding a/the adequate theory which would inclusively explain the particular cases of meaningful lives.

In what follows, I firstly suggest that, if what Metz seeks is a *universally acceptable theory* of meaningfulness in the sense that it describes an exception-free law which holds for everyone's life (at least in Western culture), then he isn't on the right track to hit it, because, as I will argue, what I called 'method of intuition' in the last section does not fit that aim at all. I secondly

¹⁷ I remark, at the same time, that we also sometimes think that the ordinary persons live meaningful lives as well as Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Picasso, or other great women and men. A related issue I will touch in Section 3 and 4.

claim that, if we take Metz's book for a work of the purely theoretical kind, we will find more faults in it than merits. I would thereby suggest that, if we want to appreciate the 'real worth' of Metz's inquiry, we ought not to regard it as a detached study of the theoretical type.

3.1

What, to begin with, does Metz mean by the term 'theory'? As mentioned above, his 'theory' means the thing that would answer the question "Is there something that all the elements on the list have in common?" (where the list here enumerates the particular ways in which lives can be meaningful). If we rigidly interpret the quantifier 'all' in this interrogative sentence, the theory Metz intends to seek should be of the *universal* kind in the sense that it would explain every case of a life's being meaningful without any exception. Or, even if we take the word 'all' for exaggerated, the theory intended there should accommodate at least sufficiently many cases of them.

How, then, can we attain such a universal theory in respect to the issue of meaningfulness? What I am going to consider is whether Metz is on the right track to seek it. My answer is negative, because his way of inquiry which relies on something called 'intuition' would, I argue, not reach any universal theory.

Let us return to Metz's argument against subjectivism. To reject this view, he argues that a certain theory of the subjectivist kind would have a counter-intuitive implication that several types of lives, *i.e.*, lives of persons devoting themselves just to harming others, maintaining 3,732 hairs on their head, memorizing the dictionary, trying to make flowers sing, *etc...* could be meaningful under a certain condition. I remark that, in developing this way of argument, Metz has committed to the intuitive judgment that such types of lives, *e.g.*, lives just harming others, cannot be meaningful in virtue of any subjective factor. Now, I should ask how this kind of judgment could work as a warrant for finding a universal theory of meaningfulness.

I would firstly say, abstractly, that anyone who relies on an intuition in her argumentation would finally shoot at her own foot. Less abstractly, if someone takes a certain kind of intuitive judgments for the foothold of his argumentation, then his discourse will inevitably suffer from criticisms based on other intuitive judgments of the same kind. How, in fact, does Metz respond to an opponent who says it's intuitively true that lives of persons just harming others can be

meaningful if they feel fulfilled about that way of living? Clearly, he cannot turn down this opposition by saying that it be counter-intuitive, because he then would fall into begging the question about which judgment is intuitive. Generally speaking, any argument grounded on some intuitive judgments finally backfires in the sense that its alleged adequacy will be rejected by another argument of the same type. Therefore, Metz's anti-subjectivist argument, which relies on several intuitive judgments in an important respect, fails to achieve its goal.

My suggestion is, in short, that there is an essential tension between relying on intuitive judgments and seeking a universal theory. The reason why I suggest this is because the typical usage of the term 'intuition' pragmatically presupposes a relevant kind of diversity and conflict (in contrast to universal agreement or unanimity). As a matter of fact, in the context where we have no conflict of opinions, we need not use the words 'intuition', 'intuitive' and 'intuitively' (*e.g.*, in the context of axiomatizing elementary arithmetic, nobody needs to say that $1 + 1 = 2$ is intuitively true, because all the participants have agreed about which mathematical statements are to be taken for true). Contrarily, it is typically in a context where a debater cannot find any firm ground to argue for his view that he would desperately allege that it be intuitively undeniable. Thus, I argue, the fact that Metz uses the word 'counterintuitive' in considering whether a given life is meaningful can be diagnosed as a symptom of his implicit commitment to the supposition that there exists a conflict of opinions about which particular lives are meaningful. Above all, Metz's intuitive judgment that the lives just harming others cannot be meaningful in terms of any subjective factor should entail his implicit concession that someone would differently judge this matter.

Now, if I am right about this point, I should say that Metz's way of seeking a universal theory is significantly incoherent. Why, however, can I say so? It's because it will emerge that his 'universal theory' is neither universal nor a theory in an important sense. What, then, is this sense?

Let us return again to Metz's intuitive judgments of meaningless lives. Metz suggests that, intuitively, the lives of persons devoting themselves just to harming others, maintaining 3,732 hairs on her head, memorizing the dictionary, *etc...* cannot be meaningful in terms of anything subjective. But, Metz has thereby admitted that there is someone who disagrees with him about this point, as explained in the last paragraph. What, then, follows? We are now in a position

to say that Metz's theory, *i.e.*, that objectivist theory which he has reached through his long-term consideration, would explain *at most* the particular cases of lives *he* (not everyone!) judges to be meaningful. Metz's theory, shortly, only explains his special intuition. This, I claim, is a fatal limitation to his theoretical inquiry, because, if the *explicanda* of an investigation was restricted to a particular person's intuitive judgments (and at most their derivatives), then the *explicans* would not deserve the name of 'theory', however inclusively it explicated the matter in question. In short, a 'theory' which only explains an individual's intuition should be short of genuine theory.

Let me summarize. I'd like to say that, so far as Metz relies on intuitive judgments about what types of lives are meaningful, he can never reach a universal theory of meaningfulness which would be ideally accepted by everyone. He should, therefore, have found some firm ground other than the thing called 'intuition'. His method of intuition is, in short, inadequate for his aim.

3.2

Are there, then, any *other* grounds (*i.e.*, other than intuition) for determining whether the lives of persons, *e.g.*, just harming others can be meaningful in virtue of something subjective? To consider this point will enable us to understand what is wrong with seeking a theory in respect to the issue of meaningfulness, as explained in the next section. In this subsection, I will show that Metz's concern guiding his thinking in the book in question is distorted in an important sense. I will finally suggest that, at the theoretical level, his work suffers from a crucial defect.

Now, do we have any ground other than intuition for determining whether a given life be meaningful? We have no objective ground, I respond, in the sense that it would determine the matter in question *independently of anyone's concern* (the italicized proviso is important). In fact, whether a given life is meaningful is a matter just so far as we are concerned about the matter.¹⁸ This means that the conflict between our judgments about whether a certain life is meaningful is hardly resolved. Let us consider the following example. Suppose that, according to his deep concern, some person judges the lives of those who aim at making

¹⁸ The pronoun 'we' here refers to the persons who actually or possibly care about meaningfulness.

their society better and devote themselves to certain public activities live to be more meaningful than of those who aim at fulfilling their own desire and pursue certain private interests. Suppose, in addition, that, according to her equally deep concern, another person judges quite conversely. In this case, we cannot decide which judgment is objectively right, because there is no firm criterion to determine it outside our concerns.

To enlarge this point, recall Metz's consideration about the reluctant Mother Teresa, who does not hold any pro-attitude toward her activities when she devotes herself to helping others. Metz says that, according to his intuition, this Mother Teresa "would have acquired some meaning in her life simply by virtue of having substantially helped so many needy people."¹⁹ Now I'm going to argue that, if we take his proper concern into consideration, then we will clearly understand why he would say so. My suggestion will be, in short, that the author's judgment about whether the reluctant Mother Teresa's life be meaningful is essentially determined by his own concern. Another person who has a different concern could, therefore, judge in the opposite way.

What is, then, Metz's ultimate concern in *Meaning in Life*? I suggest that it is the concern for developing a theory according to which a person's life would gain its meaning in virtue of using her rationality for obtaining and maintaining the condition under which human beings can live as human beings.²⁰ This is why he positively judges that the reluctant Mother Teresa's life is meaningful, because her medical activities really promote some of the human fundamental conditions. I should claim, however, that some person with a different concern, *e.g.*, a social activist who has a concern for making a society where anyone can do what she really wants, would say that, so far as that Mother Teresa is reluctantly engaged in her activities, her life has not gained its real meaning. In this sense, I suggest, a person's judgment about a certain life's meaning is significantly relative to his particular concern.

What has turned out through this consideration? What I think we ought to note is that we could reasonably wish to attain a 'universal' theory of meaningfulness which would be accepted by everyone, only if we were optimists about whether our concerns ultimately coincide with each other. As a matter of fact, however, we have a variety of concerns. Our philosophical

¹⁹ Metz (2013), p.184.

²⁰ My suggestion can be warranted by the fact that Metz has taken, so repeatedly in his book, Mandela, Mother Teresa, Einstein, Picasso, etc... for exemplary figures who meaningfully lived.

consideration on the issue of life's meaning, therefore, ought to start by admitting a hardly reconcilable diversity of our judgment about meaningfulness. In other words, when one talks and thinks about life's meaning, it's reasonable to suppose that, in respect to the question whether a given life (*e.g.*, the reluctant Mother Teresa's life) is meaningful or not, there exist a variety of equally understandable answers. These answers won't converge into the unique solution so far as our concerns are various.

Another point we ought to note is that any discourse on meaningfulness is guided by a certain particular concern. This point would entail that Metz's concern for constructing a *theory* in respect of the issue of meaningfulness is distorted in an important sense. If, in fact, someone intends to construct a theory which would explain the condition for a life's being meaningful, she ought to prohibit her personal interest from giving any special orientation to her discourse. Metz's consideration in *Meaning in Life* is, however, essentially guided by his special interest according to which he judges, *e.g.*, Mandela's life to be more meaningful than an exclusively self-interested person's. Note that this interest is not universal, because someone can understandably have a concern for claiming that any self-interested person, or even any harmfully malicious person, lives a sufficiently meaningful life.²¹ I thus suggest that Metz, who aims at constructing a theory but does not hinder his particular interest from intervening in his argumentation, falls into the distortion of concern, as it were. His thinking, which depends on the special guidance of his concern, would never reach any universal theory of the intended kind.

I would finally say that, at the theoretical level, we should find more faults in Metz's work than merits. In the last section, I remarked that his argumentation had at least three crucial steps for reaching its goal, *i.e.*, those steps of (1) rejecting supernaturalism, (2) rejecting subjectivism, and (3) rejecting rival theories of the objectivist type. As to each step, however, there exists some opposition to which the author cannot adequately respond. Suppose, *e.g.*, that someone says to Metz, "I really understand your interest for constructing a theory like the fundamentality theory, because it would nicely accommodate the fact that we sometimes find Mandela's life more meaningful than many ordinary people's; but I equally sometimes become sure of my life having a certain meaning when I have an ineffable feeling of association with something

²¹ I suggest that anyone should be able to understand this concern as well as Metz's.

supernatural; and I think that, without such feeling, my life would appear completely bland; so I'm rather interested in constructing a supernaturalist theory of meaningfulness which would accommodate such mystical experiences."

How does Metz respond to this opinion? What we should remark is that this person's concern is understandable as well as the author's. I do not, in fact, find any relevant priority of Metz's concern over the supernaturalist one. But, this means that Metz's work would theoretically fail, because its theoretical success essentially depends on rejecting any supernaturalist theory. I conclude that, as work of the purely theoretical sort, Metz's book would not be successful at all.

Is his work, then, without value in all respects? I negatively answer this question, because there is a way of reading by which we can appreciate certain virtues of Metz's investigation, as we will see in the next section. I would, therefore, conclude this section by saying that, if we want to specify the 'real worth' of his inquiry, we should not take it for a study of the purely theoretical kind. For what, then, should we take it?

4. The 'Real Worth' of *Meaning in Life*

In the last section, I critically considered whether Metz has successfully reached his theoretical goal. My answer was negative, because his argumentation suffers from a crucial defect at the theoretical level. In this section, I explain in what respect I think his work is nevertheless appealing. One of the purposes of the following consideration is to show that we can appreciate the real worth of Metz's book if, and just if, we read it as the product of his existential struggle in our endless quest for life's meaning.

In what follows, I firstly point out that Metz's inquiry is piloted, not only by the theoretical concern so far considered, but also by another type of concern, which rather gives the essential depth to his work. And, I secondly explain how this non-theoretical type of concern is different from the theoretical one. I will finally suggest that, generally speaking, we should go beyond our narrow theoretical concerns when we tackle the philosophical problems about meaningfulness.

4.1

I suggested, in the last section, that if we take Metz's book for a work of the purely theoretical kind, we should attribute more faults to it than merits. This would apparently imply that his inquiry ended in failure, because his investigation seems to be essentially theoretical in the sense that we necessarily estimate it in the theoretical manner as studies in mathematics or natural sciences. There are, in fact, some passages in his writings which actually lead us to think that it's the case²². What I am going to suggest is, however, that Metz's book contains other passages which would make us to think differently. What are, then, those passages? And, what would they make us think?

In the introductory part of the book in question, Metz says

I confess that what has largely motivated me to devote a substantial portion of my research time over the past decade to issues of meaningfulness has been an unarticulated sense that doing so would itself be a meaningful enterprise [...].²³

What we ought to remake is, I suggest, that this passage has a different tone which was not perceived in the analytic-philosophical part of his book so far considered in this paper. The point is that the author's concern, confessed in the citation in question, is not the same as his theoretical concern for seeking the best theory about meaningfulness. In writing that passage, in fact, he cares, not about development of our studies on life's meaning itself, but rather about whether he can engage in some meaningful enterprise in his life. He cares, in short, about meaning of *his own* life.

What does this mean, however? It means, I suggest, that Metz's inquiry into the issue of life's meaning is piloted, not only by his *theoretical* concern for seeking the best theory of meaningfulness, but also by his so-called *existential* concern for living a meaningful life. In this respect, his book should be said to resemble Tolstoy's *Confession* or Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* rather than studies in mathematics or the natural sciences. The point is that Metz, as well as Tolstoy and Camus, aims to save his life from the pitfall of meaninglessness by devoting himself to significant writings. In this sense, *Meaning in Life* is a trace of his

²² Cf. Metz (2013), pp. 8-9. Metz says there that "this book is addressed in the first instance to the professional scholar, and is principally devoted to organizing, clarifying, and surpassing the theories of life's meaning prominent in the philosophical literature."

²³ Metz (2013), p.1.

existential struggle for making his own life meaningful.

To enlarge what I want to suggest, I will cite another passage. Metz says

[...] it is not as though I have felt that knowledge of what makes a life meaningful is a necessary tool without which I could not acquire meaning in light of it. Instead, my view has been that finding full-blown *knowledge* of what makes a life meaningful would be meaningful *for its own sake*, and, furthermore, that *searching* for knowledge of meaning would be meaningful for its own sake, regardless of whether it successfully lands me with knowledge [...].²⁴

I'd like to say that the last 'that'-clause in this citation would give a twist to our way of reading the book in question, as explained in more detail in the next subsection. The author supposes, shortly, that *searching* for the knowledge about what confers meaning on a life is itself meaningful. By taking this supposition into consideration, we would naturally step back from the narrow perspective of just considering whether Metz has successfully reached the knowledge in question, and get into a broader perspective, *e.g.*, of appreciating what his search itself has added to our situation around the philosophy of life's meaning.

4.2

What turns out if we distinguish two types of concern, *i.e.*, theoretical and existential as it were? For one thing, if Metz's inquiry in *Meaning in Life* is guided by the concern for making his own life meaningful, we are not obliged to read this book in the theoretical manner as I applied in Section 3. We can rather estimate it by considering how his discourse developed in it would serve his interest about his own life. What I'm going to suggest is that, while Metz's investigation suffers from crucial defects at the theoretical level as I argued in the last section, it has a significant virtue at the 'existential' level, so to speak.

The first thing we should remark is that, if we pay attention to the fact that Metz cares about meaning of *his own* life in writing the book in question, we thereby get in position to say that the success of his inquiry does not require any discovery of some truth about the *universal* condition, if any, of a life's being

²⁴ Metz (2013), p.2, italics added.

meaningful. We can rather say that it would be a more significant matter to consider whether his investigation on that issue confers a meaning on his own life. In other words, if we keep our eyes on the fact that his aim in *Meaning in Life* is to engage in a meaningful activity in virtue of searching for the knowledge about meaningfulness, it turns out that what fundamentally matters is not whether he has reached the objective theory which would best explain all possible ways of meaningful life, but rather whether he has successfully engaged in some meaningful activity in virtue of his study.

One of the points in this consideration is that, generally speaking, how we should read a book would significantly vary dependently on how we understand its ultimate concern. A question then arises so far as there exist some passages in Metz's book which explicitly refer to his personal, existential concern about meaning of his own life. How should we read Metz's book if we take this type of concern seriously?

I'm going to present a schematical answer to this question, to begin with, and then enlarge it.

Schematically speaking, if we exclusively focus on Metz's *theoretical* concern for the universal theory of meaningfulness when we read his book, then we cannot but take him for a detached theoretician who would just try to describe the objective condition of life's meaning from the purely impersonal viewpoint. In this case, we cannot but read his book in a quasi-scientific manner (and will find many defects in it as explained in the last section). If we, however, turn our eyes to the author's *existential* concern so far considered in this section, we will regard him, not as a spectator, but a participant in our inescapable quest for life's meaning (where, by the phrase "our inescapable quest," I mean that each of us inevitably cares about her or his own life's meaning, at least at some level). In this way of reading, we will view his book as a report of the autobiographical kind written by one of our fellows, who is worried about meaning of his own life as well as each of us. This way of reading would, I will argue, enable us to find more excellences in Metz's work than the former, theoretical way does.

To illustrate the difference between the two ways of reading, I cite an impressive passage from the epilogue of *Meaning in Life*.

At a psychological level, I pretty much *have to* think that the search for life's meaning has itself been a source of meaning in my life, and a

substantial one at that. However, it would be all the better for me if there were a philosophical justification for my judgment; indeed, one grounded on the very theory of meaning in life that I have argued is the most justified relative to existing rivals in the literature. I conclude by briefly pointing out how the fundamentality theory entails that the search for the most justified theory of meaning in life is itself a source of meaning.²⁵

We could, on one hand, *theoretically* interpret this passage as saying that everyone should think a search for life's meaning to be itself a source of meaning and Metz's fundamentality theory would explain this universal belief about meaningfulness. I would suggest, however, that this way of interpretation would attribute a serious fault to the author, because there might be someone who has a strong faith that any intellectual investigation on meaningfulness is irrelevant to his or her own life's meaning.

We can, on the other hand, read the passage above cited in an analogous way as we read someone's autobiography. In other words, we can interpret it as reporting the author's more or less personal fact that, for his proper life, "the search for life's meaning has itself been a source of meaning." In this way of interpretation, we should not necessarily find any defects in what Metz says in the passage cited above. We can, rather, receive it as an honest confession of his undeniable reality concerning meaningfulness. Note that, in this case, we have no reason to argue against what the last citation says, even if possibly we would not be persons who think the search for life's meaning to be a source of meaning.

What I should remark is that, if we understand what the last citation says in the second way, *i.e.*, the autobiographical way, then we can interestingly suggest that Metz's fundamentality theory is his all-things-considered response to his personal but firm belief that an intellectual inquiry into life's meaning confers a meaning on the inquirer's life. This suggestion is very interesting, because, by considering it, we can find an important kind of *consistency* in Metz's inquiry. I would like to say that his investigation starts from the belief or faith that "searching for knowledge of meaning would be meaningful for its own sake" and then reaches a theory which would explain (or, more exactly, respond to)

²⁵ Metz (2013), p.249, italics added.

this thought of the starting point. In this respect, Metz is consistently faithful to his personal ultimate position as it were. In other words, his book as a whole is dedicated to the explication of this ultimate view, which he can never escape from when he considers on life's meaning.

What I want to suggest in this subsection is, repeatedly, that, if we interpret the book in question as a report of the autobiographical kind explaining what the author has attained through his effort to engage himself in a meaningful enterprise, then we have no reason to criticize him for alleging his essentially personal position on meaningfulness to be the universal theory. Metz believes that the intellectual inquiry into life's meaning, or more generally the intellectual activities in general and the enterprises for promoting the fundamental conditions under which we can live as human beings, would confer a meaning on the agent's life. He expresses, or self-expresses, this personally firm belief through his writings. I feel great sympathy for such self-expression. I have no necessity to be antipathetic to what he says, though I disagree with him on some particular judgments about meaningfulness.²⁶

There arises a problem. Someone might oppose my suggestion in the last paragraph by arguing that, if the book in question was merely a personal report, then it would lack any philosophical value. I should say that this is a reasonable doubt. I agree with this opponent that any *philosophical* investigation must not be identified with something like a person's self-portrait for private amusement of which value is completely estimated by his or her personal taste. For this reason, I ought to show that my suggestion developed in this subsection wouldn't put our philosophical consideration on meaningfulness into the pitfall of relativism of the vicious kind. In other words, I should say something to warrant that my suggestion wouldn't entail that our judgments about meaningfulness are completely matters of taste. What, then, can I say?

4.3

What I am going to say is, abstractly, that, while Metz seems to locate our philosophical conversation on the issue of life's meaning in the *space of agreement and disagreement* as it were, we should rather locate it in the *space of sympathy and antipathy*. I will argue, less abstractly, for the following. If, on one

²⁶ E.g., I believe that it's important in some contexts to say that a dirty villain's life is meaningful as well as those of Mandela and Mother Teresa.

hand, we give up the hope that we would find the universal condition for a life's being meaningful, then we would seemingly submit to the vicious kind of relativism, under which anyone would be content to be silent about any other's judgment about meaningfulness. I suggest that it is not the case. Even if there were no objective criteria of life's meaning which should be universally accepted, our conversation on the issue in question will be never governed by the relativistic rule of taste. As a matter of fact – this is a quite important point – any decent adult will oppose those others who have an obviously malicious opinion about meaningfulness, even though she or he has never obtained any universally accepted theory of the condition for a life's being meaningful.²⁷ This means that we would not fall into the pitfall of vicious relativism even without any knowledge of the universal theory in question.

In what follows, I enlarge the point roughly presented in the last paragraph. I will thereby explain how the way of reading which focuses on Metz's existential concern would enable us to find excellences in his book.

I'd like to ask, to begin with, how important it is for us to agree with each other on our judgments about whether a given life is meaningful or not. Suppose, *e.g.*, that there is a countryman who has spent his whole time in farm work in his rural area after he graduated a local junior high school in the same area. Suppose, in addition, that he has a firm belief about the meaning of his life. He confidently says, *e.g.*, "to cultivate this field and broaden our farmland, as my parents and grandparents did, it's the meaning of my life." It can turn out that this man's ultimate conception of meaningfulness is essentially different from Metz's (*e.g.*, in the case that the man thinks, not his agricultural contribution to promoting the human fundamental conditions, but rather his playing a role destined by his position in the tradition in which he positively engages, to be the source of meaning). I can, however, sympathize with this man's thought as well as with Metz's. The difference between them does not, I claim, require any solution to remove it. I suggest, therefore, that Metz has no necessity to visit that countryman and to object him that the adequate conception of meaningfulness be rather of the kind proposed in *Meaning in Life*. It would be desirable for us to regard our space of conversation on the issue of life's meaning as one in which the variety of the ultimate conceptions of meaningfulness does not seriously

²⁷ *E.g.*, there could a boy who bullies a neighbor girl with freckles by saying that any ugly freckled girl meaninglessly lives. I claim that this is an obviously malicious opinion about meaningfulness. Any adult ought to scold him.

matter in itself. There should be, in short, no demand for universal agreement on how we conceive the concept of meaningfulness.

I should hastily add that this is not any seduction to relativism of the vicious type, because what I intend to suggest is *not* that one should be content to be silent about any other's judgment about meaningfulness. In fact, I oppose to some views on life's meaning when I feel a strong antipathy to them. If, *e.g.*, someone says that anyone who has no ability to work lives meaninglessly, I would in most cases object her or him by saying that there is a source of meaning other than work or business. What I want to suggest is, to sum up, the following. The disagreement about the views on life's meaning between Metz and that countryman in the last paragraph doesn't seriously matter, but this doesn't mean that any view will go without criticism. As a matter of fact, we can feel antipathy against someone's opinion about life's meaning, and such possibility of feeling keeps us away from the rule of vicious relativism under which any differences of views on meaningfulness be matters of taste.

My suggestion is, repeatedly, that *agreement* or *disagreement* about our views does not in itself matter when we talk about the issue of meaningfulness. By suggesting this, I criticize Metz's theoretical concern for taking an insignificant matter seriously. Nothing matters, I suggest, in the fact itself that we have a variety of the ultimate conceptions of meaningfulness which are not in agreement at all.

What, then, fundamentally matters when we engage in our philosophical, reflective conversation on the issue of life's meaning? My answer is that whether all the participants in this conversation mutually help each other in living in hope for a meaningful life would be at least a more significant matter than whether they agree with each other on the theory of meaningfulness. This suggestion is, as we will see just below, essentially related to the point of the above consideration of how we read philosophical writings on the issue of meaningfulness. I will close my paper with explicating this point.

What happens, to begin with, if we read Metz's book as a report of the autobiographical kind written by one of our fellows who is worried about the meaning of his own life as well as each of us? I'd like to answer that, since it's evident to us the readers that the author sincerely tackles the problem of life's meaning to develop his own understanding of meaningfulness, we will sympathize with him in the respect in which he seriously seeks his own words to express the meaning of his life. And, as a result of this sympathy, each of us will

feel like searching for his or her own words (not the same as Metz's!) to illuminate his or her own understanding of meaningfulness. The point is that Metz's sincerity and seriousness, which is clearly noticed in the passages cited in subsection 4.1 of this paper, inspire us as his fellow-seekers for the meaning of life so to speak and encourage us to engage in an intellectual, or more accurately philosophical-reflective, inquiry into life's meaning. In this respect, I should assure, *Meaning in Life* succeeds in making us realize the significance of the 'intellectual' search for the meaning of life and introducing us to philosophical consideration on the issue of meaningfulness. Here is the excellence which the book in question has.

What I think we should remark here is, abstractly, that the real worth of Metz's book consists, not in establishing our agreement about the view on meaningfulness, but in obtaining our sympathy with his proper way of participating in our inescapable quest for life's meaning. In other word, his intellectual inquiry into life's meaning carries with it an excellence in the sense that it succeeds in encouraging us as his fellows to engage in the same type of inquiry in our ways in turn. I'd like to contend that such encouragement is more valuable in our conversation about meaningfulness than establishing some universal agreement of the view on the condition for a life's being meaningful. Summing up, the reason why Metz's inquiry has not ended in vain though his theoretical attempt suffers from a fatal defect as I argued is that we as fellow-seekers for the meaning of life would sympathize with his sincere effort to approach the life's meaning in his way and thereby be encouraged to devote ourselves to some kind of philosophical consideration on the issue in question.

What I want to stress through my whole consideration of this paper is that our perennial pursuit for the meaning of life would not call for the universal agreement about our understanding of what makes our lives meaningful. So it would be, I suggest, significant for us to reflect on how meaningful it is for us to agree with each other about our conception of meaningfulness. Certainly, we should be cautious about vicious relativism creeping in when we talk about meaningfulness, since the 'anything-goes' stance is obviously inappropriate in our thinking or caring about life's meaning. But, the non-existence of the universal agreement in question does not collapse into the situation in which any understanding of meaningfulness would equally go. As a matter of fact, we feel a strong antipathy to a malicious opinion about the meaning of life. How do you feel when you hear someone say, "That disabled person, who cannot do anything

without the aid of many people, lives meaninglessly”)? To oppose this, it is not necessary for us to have a universally agreed upon view on what confers meaning on a life. What is needed is just our decision to resolutely fight against such view.

My concluding words are about sympathy. I suggest, more or less metaphorically, that we should regard the space of our conversation on life’s meaning as one in which the dimension of sympathy and antipathy, not of agreement and disagreement, plays the essential role. The reason why I suggest so is that I think that, while the possibility of our feeling antipathy prevents our talk on life’s meaning from running on the rock of relativism as already explained, the feeling of sympathy, as fellow-emotion so to speak, enables us to get along together despite of our disagreement about the ultimate conception of meaningfulness. The sympathetic emotion in the context of our seeking life’s meaning, in addition, encourages us to aid each other with living in hope for a meaningful life, because, *e.g.*, we will cherish a hope for making our own lives more meaningful by undertaking the philosophical search for life’s meaning *if, and just if*, we see some fellow not to be in despair of meaningfulness of such search and to engage herself or himself in that attempt. Metz doesn’t despair of the significance of our philosophical investigation on the meaning of life. It is this fact that moved me to write this philosophical paper.

Reference

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Metz's Quest for the Holy Grail

James Tartaglia*

Abstract

This paper is a critique of the new paradigm in analytic philosophy for investigating the meaning of life, focusing on *Meaning in Life* as the definitive example. Metz relies upon intuition, and reflection upon recent analytic literature, to guide him to his 'fundamentality theory'. He calls this a theory of 'the meaning of life', saying it may be 'the holy grail'. I argue that Metz's project is not addressed to the meaning of life, but a distinct issue about social meaning; and that by neglecting and sidelining alternative approaches, his results are rendered provisional. I then argue that there are a number of equally legitimate senses of a 'socially meaningful life'; that Metz's exclusive and unjustified focus on only one radically diminishes the scope of his project; and that what remains is undermined by cultural specificity. Finally, I argue that the Kripkean semantics Metz adopts runs counter to his interests.

1. Metz's Project

Thaddeus Metz is the leading figure in contemporary analytic discussions associated with the phrase 'the meaning of life'. He leads a new paradigm for investigating an issue previously neglected within analytic philosophy, which he thinks offers the prospect of substantive progress being made on it for the first time. He says, 'it is only in the last 50 years or so that something approaching a distinct field on the meaning of life has been established in Anglo-American philosophy, and it is only in the last 30 years that debate with real depth has appeared' (Metz 2013a). In Metz's view, there is now a rigorous literature on this topic, which is both well-motivated and methodologically appropriate.

Meaning in Life provides a meticulous engagement with the literature in question, the insights and shortcomings of which lead Metz to his 'fundamentality theory'. At the end, he asks the reader,

Is the fundamentality theory the holy grail of Western normative philosophy, *the* respect in which the good, the true, and the beautiful genuinely constitute a unity, *the* principle that captures all and only the

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myriad factors that make up Meaning in Life? It would be presumptuous to say that the search for an adequate theory of what makes a life meaningful is over, given how few philosophers have undertaken the enquiry in earnest. However, the fundamentality theory is now the one to beat. (Metz 2013b: 249)

Thus Metz encourages his readers to rise to the challenge, by trying to construct a counterexample to the fundamentality thesis.

I think there are probably two reasons for this reference to the Holy Grail; I am less sure about the second. The first is that Metz considers it an appropriate title for either his theory, or a superior one destined to supersede it; and that by calling it this, he will encourage others to get involved. Any hyperbole would be justified as a counterbalance to the neglect philosophy has, until recently, shown this issue. The second is that Metz may have wanted to issue a rebuttal to David Wiggins, who warned philosophers that they ‘bewitch’ themselves if they think they are ‘looking for some one thing like the Garden of the Hesperides, the Holy Grail’ (Wiggins 1976: 377). After all, when Metz first presents his fundamentality theory, he writes: ‘To all those who have asked me over the past ten years, “So, what *is* the meaning of life (wise guy)?”, there you have it!’ (Metz 2013b: 235)

However, this reference immediately brought to my mind Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, in which Sir Percivale inspires the Knights of the Round Table to embark on a doomed quest for the Holy Grail; one which ultimately brings about the demise of Camelot! Perhaps this is just because I had acquired so many misgivings about Metz’s project by this point, but for better or worse, my aim in this paper will not be to respond to the fundamentality theory within the framework of the new paradigm, but rather to raise questions about that paradigm.

I would not like anybody to assume that I am a sceptic about the question of the meaning of life, however. On the contrary, I consider it just as philosophically important as Metz does; perhaps more so, because I think its implications go beyond Western normative philosophy. However what I think is important is the *traditional* question. This has been unduly neglected. But the neglect has been the fault of analytic philosophy; right from its inception. For during most of 20th century philosophy, post-Nietzschean philosophers were more or less obsessed with the issues this question raises; while analytic

philosophers were either ignoring it (the vast majority), or else denigrating it (e.g. Ayer 1947). Analytic philosophy's recent resurgence of interest in 'meaningful lives', strikes me as part of the same trend. For this debate conflates distinct issues about socially built-up meaning with the traditional question; and thereby perpetrates continued neglect of the latter.¹

Metz's project is motivated by the following four claims:

- (1) Social meaning is the root concern expressed by the question 'what is the meaning of life?'
- (2) If you want a theory of social meaning, the best place to look is analytic philosophy.
- (3) *A priori* philosophical analysis can reveal a single formula for social meaning.
- (4) This formula would reveal an objective truth, because social meaning has a natural essence (it is a physical pattern).

(1), (2) and (3) are typically presupposed within the new paradigm; (4) is a more distinctively Metzian claim. I think that without at least the conjunction of (2), (3) and (4), the new paradigm is badly motivated. And without (1) – which I find the most implausible – its principal source of interest drops away. I will now examine each in turn.

2. The Root Concern

We routinely distinguish the meaning *in* a phenomenon, from the meaning *of* that phenomenon. Consider an early Western movie. If our interest is the meaning *in* the film, we might talk about what is motivating the characters, their personalities, trials and tribulations etc. We might say that *in the film*, the Indians are the baddies. If our interest is in the meaning *of* the film, however, then we would instead talk about its significance in a wider setting than that of the fictional scenario it depicts. We might say that the film reveals the negative stereotypes in early 20th century America towards Native Americans, and also

¹ The reasons I consider the traditional question important are set out in Tartaglia 2016. They have nothing to do with a Holy Grail, because I think life is meaningless. This sounds bad in the context of contemporary debates (Metz equates nihilism to being in *hell*; Metz 2013b.: 152), but I think it is neither bad nor good.

perhaps the new-found confidence of a country creating an idealised version of its history. This, we might say, is the meaning *of the film*.

Thus *meaning in* concerns the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon (such as a film, novel, sport or musical composition), while *meaning of* concerns the meaning of the phenomenon in a wider context (a society, most typically). When we ask about the meaning of life, then, the form of words employed strongly suggests that we are not asking about the kind of meaning we build up within the context of social life. Rather, we are asking whether life itself has any meaning. Since *meaning of* questions require us to look outside the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon, this question is addressed to the possibility of a wider context in which life might have meaning. This wider context would stand to life and the meaning within it, as the wider context of society stands to a film and the meaning within it. The form of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with by God, would be the standard presupposition. But as with all questions of this form, it leaves room for us to reject its presupposition by appropriately answering that there is no meaning of life.

Given that Metz entitled his book *Meaning in Life*, you would expect it to discuss social meaning, and not the meaning of life; or perhaps argue that social meaning provides the meaning of life. However, Metz claims that his question about social meaning is what the question of the meaning of life fundamentally amounts to. This issue is treated quickly (Metz 2013b: 3, 23-4), but strikes me as crucial to motivating a book which lays claim to ‘the holy grail’; referred to as ‘the meaning of life’ when the fundamentality theory first makes its appearance. Metz begins,

Most people, or at least philosophers, interested in topics readily placed under the rubric of ‘the meaning of life’ ultimately want to know what, if anything, would confer meaning on their own lives and the lives of those people for whom they care. (ibid.: 3)

The emphasis on the questioner’s own life indicates that something is about to go wrong. For if you ask about the meaning of life, the answer will apply to everybody; even if its implications for you and your loved ones are your primary concern. Metz goes on,

Of course, some, perhaps even a substantial minority, might also or instead be interested in considerations of whether the universe has a meaning or of whether the human species does. However, I do not address these ‘holist’ or ‘cosmic’ questions in this book. (ibid.: 3)

Now something has gone wrong, because Metz clearly thinks that whether the human species has a meaning, has little or nothing to do with the question he began with. But to ask whether the human species has a meaning *is* to ask the question of the meaning of life; ‘life’ in this context means ‘human life’. If there is a wider context beyond life which confers a meaning on it, then that would of course confer meaning on our own lives and those of our loved ones. But this is just because the meaning of life would have implications for these lives. Our special concern for them may motivate us to ask the question in a particularised form, i.e. ‘what implications does the meaning of life have for me and my loved ones?’ But to answer this, you must answer the general question. Metz’s view of the motivation for asking has, I think, led him to misconstrue the particularised form of the question as conceptually isolated from the question itself. Then this particularised question is reinterpreted as one about social meaning, and subsequently identified as the question of the meaning of life.

Consider Metz’s mention of ‘whether the universe has a meaning’. Why would this be brought up, when the question is about the meaning of *life*, not the universe? The reason is that the issues are closely connected. The connection is that if you ask about the meaning of life, this will lead you to look beyond the social context of life in order to place it within a wider context. The first relevant context you will reach is that of the physical universe. This context is relevant because human life is part of the universe; so if we discover why the universe exists, we may discover why *we* exist, and hence (possibly) the meaning of our existence. But it is not a context of meaning, akin to that of human society. So recognising this, it will start to look as if life does *not* have a meaning – unless we then move to an even wider context, by supposing God created the universe, and thereby endowed phenomena within it with meaning.

Rather than there being three topics ‘readily placed under the rubric of “the meaning of life”’, then –i.e. the meanings of my life, the species, and the universe – it seems to me that the situation is as follows. There is one question of the meaning of life (i.e. the human species). A concern about the meaning of

my life may motivate me to ask this question. And once I do, I will immediately be led to inquire about the meaning of the universe.

Metz goes on to say that the reason he does not address ‘holist’ or ‘cosmic’ questions, is that the literature on the ‘individualist’ question is larger. Then he adds:

often asking ‘What is the point of it all?’ or ‘How did we get here?’ is a function of a deeper concern to know how, if at all, the existence of individual human beings can be significant. (ibid.: 3)

This strikes me as a curious sense of ‘deeper’. The question of the meaning of life digs below social meaning to inquire whether it is *grounded*, and indeed whether it needs to be; it is a paradigmatically philosophical concern that takes us directly into the heart of metaphysics and epistemology. The new paradigm question about social meaning, however, could occur to anyone trying to figure out what to do with their life. Only in a tenuous sense could the essentially practical question of ‘how to get more meaning in my life’ be construed as philosophical; and most people ask this question without getting into philosophical analysis.

Metz concludes his initial remarks by saying that he will always treat the bearer of meaning as ‘a human person’s life’; and that this includes ‘the phrase “the meaning of life”, which several in the literature, unlike me, use to connote ideas about human life as such, not a given human’s life’ (ibid.: 3). However it is far from clear that Metz does exclude the question of the meaning of ‘human life as such’ from his book, since he spends a large proportion of it discussing religious accounts of meaning; ‘supernaturalist’ accounts (ibid.: 23-31; 75-160). But any philosopher who thinks God endows our lives with meaning is talking about the traditional question. If the supernaturalist follows Metz in trying to work out which kinds of social meaning are the most positive ones – as many do – this is because they think God’s chosen meaning favours certain kinds of social meaning; they see this as an implication of their answer to the traditional question. Neither, I think, does Metz argue against these philosophers from an individualist stance. Rather, he mounts a general philosophical argument to the effect that supernaturalist conceptions of meaning are incoherent. If right, this would show that wider meaning cannot endow the human species with social meaning; it would have consequences for individuals, but the target of the

argument is general. Moreover his final chapter on nihilism seems to me squarely addressed to the traditional question throughout; Metz argues that nihilism is incoherent too.² I find it hard to avoid the conclusion that the individualist question is sometimes conflated with the traditional question; moreover I think this kind of conflation is widespread within the new paradigm.³

When Metz returns to the issue (ibid.: 23-4), he says that the question of the meaning of life ‘cannot itself be understood in theistic, or even more broadly supernaturalist, terms’, because that would fail to account for the fact that naturalists and supernaturalists debate a common subject-matter. But the reason naturalists and supernaturalists can debate is because they disagree about whether a wider context of meaning exists. Nihilists are typically naturalists, after all, and there is no conceptual reason why a naturalist should not hold that life is made meaningful by a wider context than social life.

All in all, I do not think Metz makes a strong case for thinking *Meaning in Life* is a book about the meaning of life, or that ‘cosmic’ concerns are tangential to this issue; and neither do I think he succeeds in excluding these concerns. Now you might think I am simply arguing for my interpretation of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ over Metz’s. However I think this reaction would only be justified if the question were an enigma in need of deciphering, about which various interpretations might be reasonably debated. Granted, the idea that it is ambiguous has popular currency – Metz quotes John Updike to this effect (ibid.: 17) – but I do not think this is credible.⁴ This is because I think it is one of the most ubiquitous philosophical questions in human history. As such, I do not think Metz can be considered to be offering a reasonable interpretation of *that* question.

The phenomenon of religion provides the clearest manifestation of its cultural ubiquity. Religions typically provide their followers with a belief about the meaning of life, by holding that life exists within a wider context of meaning determined by deities. Literature provides another reminder. Thus the earliest

² Metz thinks supernaturalism is incoherent because we know there is social meaning but do not know there is wider meaning (ibid.: 158). But any sensible supernaturalist will say only that they *believe* in a wider meaning that grounds their judgements about social meaning; though it might instead undermine these judgements, and there might not be any wider meaning. Metz thinks nihilism is incoherent because it both rejects wider meaning and uses it to judge that life is meaningless (ibid.: 242-4). But the nihilist does not reject the *concept* of wider meaning; they think reality does not satisfy it. I elaborate on these responses in Tartaglia 2016: chapter 2.

³ For a wider analysis of this situation, see Tartaglia 2016: introduction (appendix).

⁴ The reasons I think this idea has acquired currency are set out in Tartaglia 2016: introduction.

substantially extant work of human literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, is essentially the story of one man's quest for the meaning of life; it began a literary preoccupation which has continued unabated through Dante and Shakespeare to David Foster Wallace. The best-known discussion of this question in modern times comes from Tolstoy (1880). Tolstoy begins from the premise that his life has accrued exceptional levels of social meaning; but despite his prodigious achievements, Tolstoy starts to wonder if life has a meaning. Tolstoy clearly distinguishes social meaning from the traditional question, so given how widely reprinted his reflections are in philosophical anthologies, it is surprising that philosophers in the new paradigm do not.

Popular culture is another place philosophers can look if puzzled by the words 'what is the meaning of life?' – where they will find that it has been regularly poked fun at. If the question were about social meaning, it would be hard to see the joke. But with the traditional question the jokes fall readily into place. Douglas Adams' famous punchline that the meaning of life is 42, for instance, follows the standard humourist's strategy of disappointing expectations; we were waiting to hear the reason why we exist, but are disappointed by an answer we cannot understand.⁵

The best place for philosophers to look, however, is philosophy. In Plato, the transcendent forms provide the wider context; and the philosopher-kings guide our lives by reflecting on them. The metaphysical systems that followed, right through to Kant and Hegel, are designed to meet the same concern, typically by providing an understanding of the world with God at its centre.⁶ When doubt about whether there is a meaning of life set in during the 19th century, the issue remained just as central, culminating in Nietzsche's warnings about the threat of nihilism. And this set the scene for the 20th century; in which analytic philosophy shelved it, while continental philosophy tried to get to grips with life without meaning. This thumbnail sketch of the history of philosophy is surely enough to remind us that the meaning of life has been one of its abiding concerns; you do not need the words 'meaning of life' to recognise this. But I do not think the same could be said about the new paradigm question about social meaning, especially if we follow Metz in distinguishing it from the question of what constitutes a morally good life (*ibid.*: 5-6).

⁵ For a philosopher who takes Adams' joke very seriously, see Waghorn 2014.

⁶ For discussion of the transition which took place in 19th century philosophy which I think ultimately led to the side-lining of the traditional question in analytic philosophy, see Beiser 2014, esp. 211ff.

It seems to me that anything deserving to be called the Holy Grail in this area would be a positive answer to the traditional question. Nevertheless, Metz's interest in a formula for social meaning does – after a fashion – fall under the rubric of 'the meaning of life', because many people think the meaning of life is something like love, happiness, knowledge, art, etc.; a quick internet search reveals hundreds of such answers. However the clear oversight in the case of this kind of answer is that if there is a meaning of life (or if there is not one), then this might undermine the value we place in love, happiness, etc.

For all that has been said so far, the project of trying to find a formula for social meaning might be legitimate and feasible. On the face of it, it seems an interesting issue. However philosophers in the new paradigm should clearly demarcate their project from the question of the meaning of life. For not doing so might be misconstrued as misleading advertising – an attempt to attract interest in their project by associating it with such an evocative question. And they certainly should not dismiss the traditional question, or claim they are in fact addressing it.

3. Analytic Philosophy Dominates the Field

To the best of my knowledge, the most systematic attempt to develop an acceptable *theory* of meaning in life has been undertaken by contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophers. (ibid.: 9)

Given that Metz is only interested in social meaning, is he right? The emphasis on '*theory*' reveals a strategy for making this plausible; he says that philosophers from other traditions take 'more particularist, phenomenological, or hermeneutic approaches' (ibid: 9). I am not sure how a 'particularist' approach differs from Metz's 'individualist' one. But leaving that aside, the suggestion seems to be that you cannot have a phenomenological or hermeneutic theory; or at least a sufficiently systematic one.

However the question of the meaning of life – *and* meaning in life – is most closely associated with major philosophers from the continental tradition, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus. The restriction to social meaning does not help make the statement plausible, because this was their principal concern; they did not think there was a meaning of life, and hence sought to investigate how people can build up positive social meaning in a world without

God. That is what the 20th century discourse of ‘authenticity’ concerned. And neither does the insistence on *theory* help, because all these philosophers developed theories; massive and incredibly complex ones in the cases of Sartre and Heidegger – both phenomenological, and in Heidegger’s case, hermeneutic too.

Nietzsche had a theory of nihilism which motivated his account of social meaning. Nihilism, as he saw it, resulted from essentially religious values which project meaning into another, fictional world, such that when people retain these values after ceasing to believe in the other world, they find themselves condemning the real one. And although Nietzsche did not complete the revaluation of values he thought the onset of nihilism called for, he said enough for commentators to develop rich Nietzschean theories of social meaning (e.g. Reginster 2006). Camus later gave Nietzsche’s nihilism a more positive spin, with his concept of the ‘absurd man’ living in defiance of life’s lack of meaning; and living all the better for it (Camus 1942: 98).

Heidegger was a more systematic philosopher than Nietzsche and Camus, of course; about as systematic as they get at certain points of his career. Heidegger argues that our sporadic withdrawal from everyday dealings with objects and other people, is at the root of Cartesian ontology and epistemology; and the traditional problems attendant upon it. His critique of the prioritising and grounding of this ‘present-at-hand’ attitude, is part of a strategy to draw philosophy’s attention to the social meaning of human life. Thus he argues that ‘the less we just stare at the [Thing], and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become’; and that this relationship is one of ‘circumspection’, according to which things are seen within the context of our projects (Heidegger 1927: 98). This analysis is designed to remind us of the nature of our absorption in projects, and reveal that people typically fail to determine this, instead letting it be determined by anonymous public opinion. Heidegger’s aim is to persuade us to wrest control of our lives by choosing and possessing our projects. He means to show us how to live *authentically*, by choosing in light of ‘heritage’; since man’s deepest values are to be found within what Gadamer called ‘the historical reality of his being’ (ibid.: 435; Gadamer 1960: 277).

Heidegger is not mentioned in *Meaning in Life*. Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus are not discussed, but are occasionally mentioned as representatives of certain positions. Thus Nietzsche is mentioned as an objectivist about social

meaning; but I do not think this is a tenable interpretation.⁷ And Camus is mentioned as someone who combined supernaturalism with nihilism; I agree with this, but it occurs at the beginning of a discussion squarely addressed to the traditional question (Metz op. cit.: 242). Sartre is the continental philosopher who comes up most; as an example of a subjectivist about social meaning. However the summary which is provided of Sartre's argument from *Existentialism is a Humanism* (ibid.: 99) strikes me as embodying a serious misunderstanding; and I think this raises big questions about this interpretation generally.⁸

In short, there is no serious engagement with continental philosophy in *Meaning in Life*. But that is fair enough, because Metz did not promise any. However, he justifies this omission by sidelining the continental literature, in exactly the same way that he sidelines the traditional question. In both cases, the impression I took – and which I think any impartial reader would take – is that both the continental literature and traditional question are somewhat tangential, and can be safely ignored by those who are really serious about the 'meaning of life'.

In order to focus my misgivings about this message, let me turn to the analytic literature in question. It was not clear to me that *all* the literature Metz discusses concerns his issue (sometimes the authors are talking about a 'good and worthwhile life' or the 'value of a life' (ibid.: 150, 187)). But most of it does, and Metz has investigated it thoroughly.⁹ So what does it amount to?

Thomas Nagel (1971; 1986) and Robert Nozick (1981; 1989) produced the best-known analytic discussions of the meaning of life, and Metz discusses them both. However, both are interested in the meaning of life, and I think only Nozick can be legitimately counted within Metz's literature, since he answered his inquiry with an account of social meaning; and thus moved into the territory

⁷ Some have detected commitment to a form of objectivism within Nietzsche's perspectivism (e.g. Schacht 1983: 8-10, 104). However, even on this kind of interpretation, Nietzsche's view that 'all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture' (Nietzsche 1883-8: 149), could not be squared with objectivism as Metz understands it (physicalist moral realism).

⁸ The summary is 'since there is no God, since only God could ground objective values, and since there are values, all values are subjective'. In the last paragraph of the essay, Sartre says of his existentialism that, 'even if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view' (Sartre 1946: 369). The humanism Sartre was defending largely consisted in the claim that authenticity is objectively valuable; see, e.g., Webber 2009: chapter 10.

⁹ That said, highly pertinent books by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly (2011) and Paul Thagard (2010) are omitted; the latter poses a very direct challenge to the methodology of the new paradigm.

of the new paradigm.¹⁰ Philosophers who approach the problem from a religious perspective (e.g. Cottingham 2003) also typically have things to say about social meaning within this context. In addition, the literature can lay claim to well-known articles by Richard Taylor (1970), Paul Edwards (1967), and John Kekes (1986), which all moved towards the new paradigm by trying to show that the traditional question can be put aside, so long as we are subjectively engaged by social meaning. And there is also Wiggins' article; although the overall message of this piece seems to be a warning about the new paradigm that was to come (Wiggins 1976: 378).

The new paradigm first emerges in recognisable form in the late 1990s, with the work of Susan Wolf. Metz has adopted Wolf's approach exactly, namely that of stating paradigm-cases of meaningful lives (e.g. Mandela, Picasso, Einstein) and then applying intuition to various test-scenarios in an attempt to isolate the meaningful factors. These intuitions can be highly specific; Wolf does not think that aerobics adds meaning to life, for instance (Wolf 1997: 233). The other major influence on Metz, which appeared around the same time, is Alan Gewirth's *Self-Fulfillment* (1998), which provides the basis of his fundamentality theory. However Metz distances himself from Gewirth on the basis of two intuitions. Firstly, that contra Gewirth, 'basic natural sciences' are not *significantly* more meaningful than biological and social ones (Metz agrees they are more meaningful). And secondly, that universal activities could be as trivial as cutting toenails (Metz op. cit.: 217-8).

Since then, a number of articles have been written in the Wolf / Metz vein, and *Meaning in Life* usefully brings them together within a systematic framework. However, in terms of sheer quantity, which is a factor Metz often mentions, I do not think this literature bears much comparison with the continental one; just going on the four figures I mentioned, and the vast secondary literature on them, I think the continental literature would win hands down. But if quality is the issue, then whether philosophers interested in social meaning should exclusively focus on the analytic literature depends on the credibility of the new paradigm approach, which is an issue I turn to in the next section. However, it also depends on the credibility of continental approaches; and this is not addressed in *Meaning in Life*.

Metz mentions that there is also relevant literature in empirical psychology

¹⁰ I argue in Tartaglia 2016: introduction (appendix) that Nozick's argument for making this transition involves a logical error.

(ibid.: 9). There is a well-established scientific research programme stemming from the work of Viktor Frankl (1946). Given this, it seems to me that philosophers do not need to speculate about what people mean by a socially meaningful life. Moreover, psychology, quite unlike the new paradigm, takes cultural specificity into account; it is alive to the possibility that people in Japan and the USA, for instance, might have different things in mind by a ‘meaningful life’ (Steger et. al. 2008; see also Mason 2013). So, if your interest is in the actual concept, its importance to people, and in helping those who feel their lives are meaningless – which does seem to be the primary concern of many philosophers (Kekes 1986, 2000; Levy 2005, Heyd and Miller 2010, Oakley 2010, Brogaard and Smith 2005) – then this area of psychology should not be neglected. Even if you think philosophical analysis can penetrate ordinary usage to discover a single formula for a socially meaningful life, it still seems clear that such analyses should begin from real data; especially when it exists.

Let me be clear about what I have and have not been arguing. I have not been arguing that the traditional question is the only legitimate concern for philosophers. And neither have I been arguing that the continental approach to social meaning is better. Rather, my opposition has been to side-lining the traditional issue and continental literature, by suggesting that social meaning is the real, central issue about the meaning of life, and that the recent analytic literature provides the best, most serious attempt to address it. Philosophers are of course free to disregard the traditional issue in favour of social meaning, but they need to be clear that this is what they are doing, and should do so consistently. However, I do not think they are free to disregard the continental literature and then make great claims for their results, for this literature might undermine what they are saying, or at least contain neglected, supplementary insights. That was the mistake Casaubon made in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*; he claimed to have the ultimate answer (‘The Key to All Mythologies’), but it turned out that he had not engaged with vast swathes of pertinent literature – because he could not read German.

Of course, it is good for philosophers to try out new approaches, and there is already plenty of excellent analytic work on continental philosophers. However, the new paradigm proceeds as if it were the only approach analytic philosophers need concern themselves with. What I am suggesting, then, is that philosophers who are really serious about social meaning should also investigate the continental literature, empirical psychology, and the contributions of analytic

philosophers before the Wolf / Metz agenda became entrenched. If they find that the new paradigm usurps all else, then so be it – but this would need to be justified. Without such a justification, its results will be provisional, to the effect that *if* we take this approach and ignore others, then we will alight upon *this* result. It might still be interesting, but it should not be held up as the Holy Grail.

4. A Single Formula

On the face of it, the concept of a socially meaningful life looks highly culturally specific. It is not the kind of thing you would expect a Greek warrior, medieval hermit, and contemporary hedge fund manager to agree about. It also looks situationally specific, in that our inclinations to describe a life as socially meaningful might be different at the funeral of a loved one, than in a history lesson about an influential despot. At a funeral, it would be offensive to point out that just like the deceased, Hitler had a very meaningful life; but in a history lesson, it would be silly to deny that he did. This strongly suggests that this attribution has different senses. On the face of it, then, the prospects for finding a single formula for socially ‘meaningful’ seem about as good as for socially ‘cool’.

Here are four things you might mean by a socially meaningful life:

- (1) The social meaning of life is determined by social impact. As Metz says, ‘meaningful’ and ‘significant’ are synonyms (op. cit.: 21).
- (2) The social meaning of life is determined by *good* social impact.
- (3) The social meaning of life is determined by what we value. So the telly-addict whose life has negligible impact, still has a meaningful life because of their love of TV.
- (4) The social meaning of life is determined by what we do. So the telly-addict has the meaning of their life determined by TV even if they hate it.

We use the notion of a ‘meaningful life’ in all of these ways. At a funeral, (2) and (3) would be apposite; in a historical or sociological discussion, (1) and (4) would be more likely to come up. Now Metz and others in the new paradigm think that only (2) is worthy of consideration; they think it best captures what we mean by a ‘meaningful life’. It is this notion which fuels all the intuitions which

lead Metz to his fundamentality formula. However, this produces a clash with the other side of Metz's methodology, namely accommodating the analytic literature. For many philosophers evidently have (3) in mind. (1) and (4) have been neglected, and the reason for this, I suspect, is that philosophers have wanted to discuss the notion of a socially meaningful life within the realms of value-theory, which only (2) and (3) allow for. But this is not a good reason, given their aim of analysing what we mean by a meaningful life *simpliciter*.

The clear conflict between basic judgements of meaningfulness between these senses, it seems to me, conclusively demonstrates the untenability of the new paradigm project. For if you have (1), (3) or (4) in mind, then Hitler had a meaningful life (Kekes 2000: 30; Frankfurt 2002: 246-8); while if you have (2) in mind, then Hitler had a meaningless life (Kauppinen 2012: 361; Metz op. cit.: 5) – or in Metz's view, a less-than-meaningless life (ibid.: 234). If philosophers cannot agree on whether *Hitler* had a meaningful life, however, then I see no prospect of a nuanced debate in which careful analysis leads us to a single formula. I am happy to rest my entire case on the Hitler question, in fact. If new paradigm philosophers cannot provide a principled, non-question-begging reason why we should consider Hitler's life meaningless, then I think their research programme falls at the first hurdle. And I do not think they will be able to, because these are all perfectly legitimate notions of a 'meaningful life'. I imagine that all around the world at the moment, senses (1) to (4) are being employed, and I see no prospect of arguing that any of these uses are confused.¹¹

The new paradigm could retreat to the ambition of analysing one particular sense of a 'meaningful life'. But given that the question of the meaning of life has already been excluded, this would raise doubts about the motivation for such a project. Moreover, given that of all the senses, (2) looks the most culturally specific, since different activities are valued within different societies – and the evidence from empirical psychology backs this up – it seems that (2) is the least likely to yield to the methods of the new paradigm.

Let us turn to Metz's justification for focusing exclusively on (2). He says he will 'ascertain whether there is something common to, and unique to, the conceptions of life's meaning to be found in at least the Anglo-American philosophical literature' (ibid.: 18). That does not strike me as methodologically

¹¹ Wolf's combined subjective and objective criterion for social meaning is an attempt to unify senses (2) and (3). However, I have argued in Tartaglia 2016: introduction (appendix) that the result is incoherent.

sound, because the literature in question might have neglected some perfectly valid (non-contradictory, widespread) conceptions of life's meaning. Moreover it is an approach that cannot succeed even on its own terms, because some in that literature have focused on (3) rather than (2) (hence the disagreement about Hitler).

In any case, Metz finds three promising themes: purposiveness, transcendence, and esteem. He then proceeds to argue that they are each individually unsatisfactory. However it seems to me that Metz makes his case by relying on intuitions based on sense (2), and hence begging the interesting question. Thus he argues that not just any purpose will make life meaningful, because not all are '*prima facie* candidates for conferring meaning' (ibid.: 25). But that just means they are not all are *good* in the sense Metz thinks (2) requires. Transcendence will not do either, because it 'wrongly entails' that naturalist accounts are 'not theories of meaning at all' (ibid.: 29). But philosophers invoke transcendence to address the traditional question, as we have seen; and if there were a meaning of life, it might provide its own account of meaning in sense (2). The esteem criterion is trickier for Metz to extricate himself from, since it is at home in sense (2). But he makes the attempt by appealing to the intuition that living in a natural ecosystem might make your life more meaningful, without being something you can take pride in (ibid.: 34). As far as I can see, this simply shows that Metz's idea of 'good' does not necessarily require personal achievement.

Metz concludes that one single property will not do the trick. But by tying his three themes in with sense (2) – which in the case of transcendence, requires him to completely reconstrue it as 'transcending one's animal nature' (ibid.: 35) – he is able to see overlap between them. He then presses on with his project of looking for a single formula for social meaning (ibid.: 35-6). But I think Metz has failed to see that purposiveness has just as much application to sense (3), that transcendence concerns a different issue, and that his passing denial that sense (1) can be conceptually ruled out (ibid.: 26) undermines his project; for if sense (1) cannot be ruled out – remember that on sense (1), Hitler had a paradigmatically meaningful life – then the fundamentality formula cannot be the correct analysis of the concept of a socially meaningful life. Metz thinks he can accommodate the sense that social impact makes lives meaningful, by restricting this to *good* social impact; but without an argument for why we should do this, he cannot claim to be analysing the concept of a socially

meaningful life *simpliciter*. At best he could be right about sense (2); but the natural worries I have been raising about cultural specificity put this into serious doubt.

5. Physical Patterns

Metz thinks that his intuitions about how meaningful people's lives are detect physical patterns in the world. If this were right, it might put to rest my worries about cultural specificity, and hence show that the new paradigm project of finding a single analysis for social meaning in sense (2) is still viable.

His reasoning begins from an acceptance of Kripke's account of *a posteriori* necessary identities for natural kind terms, according to which the term 'water' has its reference causally fixed upon a natural essence, thus allowing us to empirically discover the necessary truth 'water = H₂O'. Metz thinks this account can be extended to cover claims about meaningfulness. He realises that the kind of claims he wants to defend are normative, and hence, on the face of it, radically unlike natural kind terms. But he nevertheless thinks that claims such as 'you ought to do X' denote physical patterns in the world, such that it could be an objective fact that if you do X, your life will *ceteris paribus* become more meaningful (ibid.: 92-3). Metz thinks these patterns could in principle be measured with precision and recorded by a meaningfulness calculus, akin to Bentham's hedonistic calculus; he supposes that 'the desirable is well-represented with a positive number, and the undesirable with a negative one' (ibid.: 234).¹²

This is an original and substantive position, but unfortunately Metz offers very little in way of justification for it. He is encouraged by the fact that some philosophers have applied a Kripkean account to moral realism, but notes that nobody has extended this to normative claims before (ibid.: 92). However, he does not say why he thinks that such an extension is possible; he simply says there is 'nothing stopping' it. As such, I have no justification to critically engage with, and so shall just say why I think a moral realist would be ill-advised to extend their account in this way.

Any physical pattern for social meaning must have been created through our behavioural interactions. Metz accepts this, saying 'a world without human

¹² Nozick once toyed with this idea in passing (Nozick 1974: 50) but did not pursue it.

beings would be devoid of value, or at least would have much less than it does now' (ibid.: 172). This immediately creates two major problems for his proposal, as I see it. The first concerns his methodology. For if the project is to detect the physical patterns people have created – and people did not create water, after all – then we need to know as much as possible about the linguistic and other behaviour that has created them. An empirical study of what people in different contemporary cultures say when they use 'a meaningful life' as a term of approbation would be a good start; but Metz, in line with the standard practice within the new paradigm, does not take empirical psychology into account.¹³ However if the study was to be really serious, I think you would also have to look into the history. With all that data at hand, you might conceivably be in a position to draw conclusions about a physical essence. But Metz simply uses his intuitions; together with those of some recent analytic philosophers, who sometimes radically disagree with him.

The second problem is that if our behavioural interactions create physical patterns which dictate what we ought to do to make our lives meaningful, then these patterns might conflict. Perhaps Samurai culture created a pattern revolving around honour, according to which your life is made more meaningful if you show dishonourable enemies no mercy. Metz could not rule out the possibility of such cases, given that it is physically possible for humans to behave in this manner, and thus create the patterns in question. But then, which norms govern us? Metz cannot say that Samurai norms only governed their culture, because that would be to abandon his quest for a universal formula. He cannot say such norms are impossible, if norms are just physical patterns. And he cannot say that such norms are simply not actual, because that would require him to abandon his methodology and engage with historical and otherwise empirical evidence.

Metz's physical norms commit him to either moral scepticism or relativism, both of which are anathema to his philosophical outlook. For if our behaviour creates the patterns constitutive of a socially meaningful life, then if we change behaviour, there will be new patterns. So if people stop valuing the positive orientation of rationality towards the fundamental conditions of human existence, the fundamentality formula will no longer apply. If the physical patterns of the old and new norms both govern human behaviour ahistorically, they will conflict.

¹³ The sole exception to this rule I have come across is Kauppinen 2013.

We would have to say that according to the old pattern, we ought to X, and according to the new pattern, we ought to not-X; so the physical world would not tell us whether we ought to X. But if we instead say that the physical patterns govern only the cultures that produced them, then we are relativists; in which case we must give up on the Holy Grail, and start paying attention to the specifics of different cultures.

These are the daunting problems that would face a Kripkean account of normative claims about social meaning. But I think any such account is a non-starter in any case, because in the case of social meaning, there is nothing asocial for our concepts to latch onto. When concepts are built around natural phenomena such as our perceptual capacities, or biological pain and our natural aversion to it, then an appeal to natural essence may have some plausibility. But norms about positive social meaning have nothing of the kind; and so given that social practices vary widely and continually change, I think we can assume there is no unified natural pattern. A minimal evidential starting point for hypothesising such patterns, it seems to me, would be a strong case for believing that there is a substantive, pancultural, conceptual unity supervening on the physical world. Given that Metz actively disavows the latter (*ibid.*: 36), then, it seems to me that not only does he lack reason for believing in unified physical patterns; he endorses a good reason for thinking there are not any.

6. Conclusion

The new paradigm makes me instinctively uneasy. This is because it *ranks people's lives*; ordinary people find their lives condemned as relatively meaningless by formulas like Metz's – while philosophy always seems to turn out to be a particularly meaningful pursuit. I suspect that any armchair attempt by philosophers to analyse social meaning in sense (2) is likely to have this outcome, because their intuitions will be guided by the kind of lives they admire. However although a comparative tendency is built into (2), I see absolutely no reason to think the judgements it produces should be capable of being analysed with precision, any more than judgements based on (1) should be. Perhaps some have the vague intuition that Gandhi had a more meaningful life than Mother Teresa in sense (2), and that Hitler had a more meaningful life than Gandhi in sense (1) – but it seems eminently sensible to leave the matter at that. Then these senses would remain as refreshingly anodyne as (3), in which we might say that

a man's hobby gave his life meaning, or (4), in which we might say that the meaning of a medieval peasant's life was determined by his farming activities. But so much for my instinctive unease; for I think I have done more than enough to raise serious doubts about the foundations of this project, which need to be addressed before anybody starts thinking about devising an imaginative counterexample to the fundamentality formula. Until that happens, philosophers interested in either the meaning of life or social meaning should remain in Camelot.

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Meaning without Ego

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Abstract

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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¹ Metz, (2013), p. 236.

² Metz, (2013), p. 9.

³ Metz, (2013), p. 249.

meaning.⁴

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

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

Said the Buddha:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ Metz, (2013), p. 235.

⁷ Metz, (2013), p. 235.

⁸ Metz, (2013), p. 236.

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

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

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

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

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

2. Considering the Idea of Meaning in Early Buddhism

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

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

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

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

¹² Brannigan, (2010), p. 52.

¹³ de Silva, (1976), p. 20.

¹⁴ Hamilton, (2000), p.13.

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ Collins, (1996), p. 163.

¹⁶ Collins, (1996), p. 164.

¹⁷ Collins, (2010), p. 42.

¹⁸ Metz, (2013), pp. 230-231.

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

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

Likely not, as G. P. Malalasekera explains:

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

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

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

²⁰ Malalasekera, (1996), p. 11

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

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

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

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

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

3. What Might Meaning Mean in Early Buddhism?

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

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

²³ Metz, (2013), p. 232.

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

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

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

²⁴ Hoffman, (1987), p. 53.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He says:

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

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

²⁷ Metz, (2013), p. 64.

²⁸ Ross, (1952), p. 106.

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Meaning in Nibbāna

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

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

will continue in the cycle of *saṃsāra*.

5. The Dilemma of *Parinibbāna*

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

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

T.W. Rhys Davids explains:

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

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

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

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

6. What Challenges Does Early Buddhism Offer Fundamentality Theory?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³² Metz, (2013), p. 220.

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁶ D. J. Kalupahana, (1976), p. 45.

³⁷ D. J. Kalupahana, (1976), p. 50.

³⁸ D. J. Kalupahana, (1976), p. 51.

7. Is There a Buddhist Fundamentality Theory?

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

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

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

that could be falsehoods.

8. The Dimension of Meaning in Early Buddhism

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴¹ Keown, (1992, 2001), pp. 177-178.

⁴² Metz, (2013), p. 198.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Death and the Meaning of Life

A Critical Study of Metz's *Meaning in Life*

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Abstract

In *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*, Thaddeus Metz advocates a kind of naturalistic objective theory of meaning in life, through a rejection of supernaturalism. In this paper, I examine Metz's argument on supernaturalism, in particular, soul-centered theory and immortality. I will argue that his objection to supernaturalism is inadequate because he does not treat properly a familiar idea about the relationship between *death* and meaning, namely, the idea that a person's death itself makes her life *meaningless*. Metz interprets immortality as a condition for *obtaining meaning*, but in view of the idea that I present, immortality means the *negation of the death* of a person whose life *already has meaning*. As I see it, this idea about death and meaning is also one of the motivations to accept a soul-centered theory and therefore key to a fuller rejection of supernaturalism.

1. Introduction

In *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study*, Thaddeus Metz advocates a kind of naturalistic objective theory of meaning in life on the basis of a comprehensive survey of existing literature about this topic in analytic philosophy. In this paper, I focus on his argument in Part II of his book on supernaturalism, in particular, the argument in Chapter 7 on soul-centered theory and immortality. I will argue that Metz does not treat properly a familiar idea about the relationship between *death* and meaning, namely, the idea that a person's death itself makes her life *meaningless*. Metz interprets immortality as a condition for *obtaining meaning*, but in view of the idea that I present, immortality means the *negation of the death* of a person whose life *already has meaning*. As I see it, this idea about death and meaning is also one of the motivations to accept a soul-centered theory and therefore key to a fuller rejection of supernaturalism. Besides this, my argument involves some general metaphysical remarks about life's meaning.

The argument goes as follows. In Section 2, I summarize the metaphysical devices concerning the relationship between meaning and *person*, rather than

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life. By using these devices, in Section 3 and 4, I examine Metz’s argument on soul-centered theory and immortality. Although Metz interprets immortality as a condition for *meaningfulness*, I argue that immortality can be taken as the *negation of the death* of a person whose life *already has meaning*. In Section 5, I conclude by adding a few suggestions about the alleged importance of “traces” of life, which Metz takes up peripherally.

2. A Metaphysics of Meaningfulness

I introduce here a somewhat formal and metaphysical way of talking about meaningfulness in order to make clear my main argument in the sections below. One of the aims of the question of meaning in life can be stated generally as follows: to specify the *properties* that make a person’s life meaningful when she has them, whether they are intrinsic or relational, physical or non-physical, natural or supernatural. Examples of such properties may include *being such that her family members live long and happily, finding a cure for a certain intractable disease, making a contribution to the liberation of non-human animals*, and so on. According to Metz’s own “fundamentality theory,” the (general) property that makes a person’s life meaningful would be (*sufficiently*) “*employ[ing] her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.*”¹ By contrast, according to subjectivism, which Metz rejects, the (general) property might be “*obtain[ing] the objects of her (or her group’s) propositional attitudes*” in terms of *meaningfulness* (p. 220).

It is important to emphasize that the subject of these properties is *person*, not *life*. Of course, it is trivially true that the property of “meaningfulness” is a property of *life*, as Metz maintains that life is the bearer of meaningfulness (3.2 and 1.2). Indeed, we use phrases like “a meaningful *life*,” “her *life* has meaning,” “her *life* is meaningful,” and so on. However, I focus on the properties of the person, which make her life meaningful, because my interest in this paper is in the relationship between death and meaning.² What dies is the person, not the

¹ This is from (FT₁), which he formulates as the most basic statement of his view (Metz 2013, p. 222). Hereafter, where reference to Metz’s book is made, I only mention the page or section number.

² This is also a reason why I clarify the metaphysics of meaningfulness in detail in this section. As Metz focuses on the notion of life, not person, it is important for the sake of clear argument to distinguish between the devices that Metz uses and those that I use. Additionally, in this paper, I argue only about a person’s life, for the sake of simplicity. It seems that there is no good reason to exclude

life (instead, the life ends, in that it has a terminal point).

We can call the kind of property at issue a “meaning-making property” in an analogy with welfare: on the simple form of hedonism, for example, pleasantness is a good-making property (painfulness is a bad-making property). A person’s having good-making properties makes her well off or promotes her welfare.³

There are two important additional elements concerning how a person has meaning-making properties: time and degree. First, let us see about time. Metz distinguishes two senses of “life.” One is “whole-life” and the other is “part-life” (pp. 38–9). He argues that both of them can be the bearer of meaning (3.3–3.5). My focus is on the relationship between the time when a *person* has a certain meaning-making property and the time when her life is meaningful by virtue of her having that property. As I see it, there are various relationships between these times. For example, a person may have, at a certain time, the property of *achieving her great goal for which she sacrificed her life*, but the obtaining of it appears to make not only her part-life of that time meaningful. It seems natural to think that it makes her whole-life meaningful. Perhaps getting some meaning-making property at a certain time makes the period of her life after the time of getting it, or a certain period before the time of getting it, meaningful retroactively. While the clarification of the general condition of the relationships at issue is worth undertaking, here I treat them on a case-by-case basis and do not pursue the clarification further.

Second, meaning may come in degrees. Metz maintains that a life can be both *pro tanto* (that is, to some extent) meaningful, or, on balance, meaningful (pp. 39–40). This distinction appears to make sense in terms of both part-life and whole-life. It seems plausible to think that we can do both *pro tanto* meaningful things and *pro tanto* meaningless things at the same certain time or period (for example, a Sunday) and that we can evaluate whether these parts of life are, on

the possibility that (at least some intelligent) non-human animals have meaningful lives.

³ There is at least one interesting difference. The bearer of both welfare and good-making properties is basically thought to be the person, but there is another category of the “intrinsic value for a person” whose bearer is standardly thought to be states of affairs. A person’s welfare is determined by the intrinsic value for her of each state of affairs, that she has certain good-making properties. Besides, each whole- and part-life can be thought of as a complex composition of states of affairs. Then, using the notion of a state of affairs would enable a unified treatment of both a whole- and part-life. See, for example, Bradley (2009), esp. pp. 4–8. The same might be said about meaningfulness, but Metz seems not to be concerned in his book about what life itself is, whether it is whole or part.

balance, meaningful.⁴ I will focus only on a meaning-making property that makes life, on balance, meaningful and hereafter represent it as “*P*,” because this *P* is relevant to my interest in this paper about *meaninglessness*, which in turn is important to the issue of death. If *P* is an on-balance meaning-making property, the lack of any *P* represents, on balance, the meaninglessness of one’s life. On the other hand, if *P* is *pro tanto*, the lack of any *P* can mean a *pro tanto* meaningless but still *pro tanto* meaningful life. The former but not latter kind of meaninglessness seems the object of our concern when we wonder whether our lives are meaningless or not.

Now, let us turn to how a life does *lack* meaning, that is, how a life is *meaningless*. This topic relates to Metz’s arguments about “anti-matter,” which is a negative factor of meaning (pp. 63–4). Without this negative factor, we can simply think in this way: When *S* lacks any *P*, *S*’s life is (on balance) meaningless. However, in the context of showing similarity (and dissimilarity) between pleasure and meaning (Chapter 4), Metz claims that meaning is not monopolar but bipolar, that is, meaning has both positive and negative scales. Our language seems to suggest that, as he admits (p. 64), meaning has only a monopolar dimension. However, Metz argues that while “blowing up the Sphinx for fun” appears to be much worse in terms of meaning than “oversleeping,” both would be represented with the same zero level of meaningfulness if meaning had only a positive dimension. If he is right, *blowing up the Sphinx for fun* is an example of, so to say, anti-meaning-making properties (hereafter “*P^A*”).

I am not convinced that life can have negative meaning. First, intuition on Metz’s example may differ. Some might intuit that actions like blowing up the Sphinx for fun are just a waste of time and just have no value (cf. Kauppinen 2015, p. 604). At least, our evaluations will depend on the further detailed description. Besides, there seem to be some clear differences between “blowing up the Sphinx for fun” and “oversleeping,” other than meaning. The former is an action that destroys a thing with salient external values (e.g., aesthetic and historical values) and such an action is perhaps even morally wrong. Although most of us think that such actions have an important difference in value, it does not seem clear that the difference, which our intuition tells us about the situation, is about meaningfulness. Second, actions (or more generally, events) can *make worse* one’s life without a negative scale. All these actions need is to be making

⁴ I suspect that Metz thinks that the notion of “on balance” meaningfulness applies only to whole-life.

a difference *comparatively*. It seems plausible to take into account a counterfactual element when we evaluate actions: a comparative evaluation between the value of the actual situation where one does an action and the counterfactual situation where the action and the consequences of it do not hold. Mere oversleeping seems not to make so much of a difference, but blowing up the Sphinx seems to make a great difference, because, for example, a person who can do such an aggressive thing could have done much more meaningful actions otherwise.⁵ Such a person wastes her time and ability by doing the thing with no meaning.

I have a doubt about the concept of anti-matter, but the remark I have just stated is not sufficient to counter it. Therefore, I will examine not only the monopolar view but also the bipolar view. Under the monopolar view, person S's life is meaningless when S does not have any *P*. Under the bipolar view, which admits anti-matter, S's life is meaningless when S has some *P^A* (I presuppose that some cases of having a certain *P^A* are represented with the zero level of meaning). I also assume that *P^A* is an on-balance anti-meaning-making property, just the same as *P*. In the next section, by using these metaphysical devices, I will start to examine Metz's argument against the supernaturalism of meaning in life.

3. Metz on Soul and Immortality

In Chapter 7 of his book (especially, 7.3 and 7.4), Metz examines soul-centered theory, "the view that a significant existence is nothing but being constituted by a soul that lives forever in a certain way, where a soul is an indestructible, spiritual substance" (p. 123). The point of the criticism I will propose against Metz's argument can be stated in several different ways. First, the idea of immortality should not necessarily be taken to be a supernatural one. I do not mean, however, a physical (or at least non-supernatural) eternal life like that of a vampire. Nor do I mean a modal status, such as being unable to die (cf. pp. 123–4).⁶ I will argue that there is another simple idea: immortality means

⁵ I do not mean here that we should admit the notion of "external meaning" as a distinct category, according to which a *mere* fact of an event's being counterfactually better in respect of meaning makes the event meaningful. See Smuts (2013), pp. 553–6 as a criticism of this notion.

⁶ I also do not mean the view, which Metz mentions negatively, that the reason why we crave our own immortality or long-term consequences is explained by our capacity to conceive of ever better states and our tendency to wish to achieve these (pp. 247–8).

the *negation of death*, especially in the context of what I want to call Tolstoian nihilism, the view that a person's death itself makes her life meaningless. To put my point another way, according to Metz, soul-centered theorists think that immortality is important because an eternal soul has unusual great value. I point out, however, that there is at least one understanding of immortality in which the amount of value is not important: immortality can mean simply retaining the existence of things with their usual earthly value.

The idea that immortality means the negation of death seems not controversial in itself. Metz may of course realize this, and he may just be limiting his argument to the relationship between the supernatural soul and meaning. However, I argue that once we see the concept of immortality as the negation of death, the point of the standard rationales for soul-centered theory can be fully understood. Finally, I attempt to agree with Metz that supernaturalism is wrong, but I think that a close examination of the idea that I focus on is key for a fuller rejection of supernaturalism.

I will now begin to examine Metz's argument against soul-centered theory. According to Metz, there are three traditional rationales for soul-centered theory. (a) *Realizing justice* (7.4.1): "[L]ife would be meaningless if the injustices of this world were not rectified in another world" (p. 124). Or, as Kant claims, a person's moral perfection with happiness requires her own immortality (p. 126). (b) *Making a permanent difference* (7.4.2): "[L]ife would be meaningless if nothing were worth pursuing and that nothing would be worth pursuing if it would not have an 'ultimate consequence,'" and "one could apparently make a permanent difference only if one's life did not end with the death of one's body" (p. 128). (c) *Transcending limits* (7.4.3): "[T]he meaning of something in general appears to be a matter of asking about its relationship with other things [...]. A life is meaningful, then, insofar as it relates to something beyond it in the right way" (p. 130). In addition, immortality would be an instance of transcending one's own temporal limit (p. 131).

Metz argues that although all rationales might require an afterlife, each of them does not require an *eternal* life. As I see it, his basic argument can be understood by using the concept of meaning-making property *P*: in order for person *S* to get some *P* at a certain time *t*, it is necessary to exist at *t* but not necessary to persist after *t*. Therefore, it is not necessary for *S* to persist *eternally*. Metz's explanation about each rationale and argument against it can be understood as follows: (a) *P* for realizing justice includes *being compensated for*

the losses in one's lifetime, being punished for wrongness and vice, being rewarded for rightness and virtue, or being morally perfect. Incidentally, all these *Ps* appear to make one's whole-life meaningful (it is possible that the same thing can be said about *Ps* for other rationales, which we will see below). Metz maintains that we can get these properties in finite time, even if we eventually come to an end (pp. 124–7). In particular, a limited (afterlife) time is sufficient to get the reward of a limited living time. Or, with regard to moral perfection, “We seem able to conceive of a morally ideal agent who *eventually dies*” (p. 126, emphasis mine). This remark means that *S*'s persistence after getting *P* is not required to get *P*.⁷ (b) According to Metz, as I understand him, *P* for making a permanent difference can be thought of as *making a permanent difference on infinite things other than S* (p. 129). *Once S* has gotten this *P*, *S*'s own persistence is not needed. Therefore, *S* can get some *P* without *S*'s own eternal life. (c) *P* for transcending limits is understood as *crossing S's boundary, or being connected with an external value*. According to Metz, certain valuable things that can be realized in *S*'s lifetime, such as loving others or creating a work of art, seem sufficient to transcend limits. Thus, transcendence of *S*'s own temporal limits is not needed (pp. 130–1).

Metz's argument seems simple and convincing. There appears to be no good reason to think that we humans cannot get those *Ps* mentioned above in our limited time. In order to get *Ps*, we do not need persistence after getting them, or, needless to say, eternity. Therefore, these three rationales would fail to support soul-centered theory (at least in its standard forms).

Here, it is worthwhile to give an overview of Metz's argument in Part II of his book on the supernaturalism of meaning in life. Metz's strategy against supernaturalism is to show that any promising argument for supernaturalism is based on the *perfection thesis*, “the claim that *meaning in one's life requires engaging with a maximally conceivable value*” (p. 138, emphasis original), and then to reject this thesis. In more detail, in Chapter 7 of his book (7.1–7.2), he maintains that the most defensible God-centered view is the idea that “the more we respect, love, and commune with a (non-purposive) being with the qualitative properties,” by which he means atemporality, immutability, simplicity, and infinitude, “and the more it does so with us, the more meaningful our lives” (p. 122, see also p. 110). He claims that a perfect being with the properties has a

⁷ He also rejects the idea that the only way to separate from one's physical self is to become an indestructible soul (pp. 125–6).

“maximally conceivable value.” This concept of value is also key for his argument against soul-centered theory. First, after criticizing the three existing rationales for soul-centered theory (as we have seen), Metz shows that once these rationales are reconstructed so that they support soul-centered theory, these arguments would claim that an immortal soul is required for engaging with a “maximally conceivable value” (7.3–7.6). Metz argues finally that that value is not necessary for meaningfulness, and he rejects the perfection thesis and supernaturalist theories in general (Chapter 8). I avoid examining Metz’s argument against supernaturalism further, but it has been confirmed that Metz’s basic line of thought involves the intimate connection between immortality and a kind of superlative value.

4. Death and Meaninglessness

I agree with Metz that none of the three rationales work well for soul-centered theory, but I think there is an appealing idea in their original form that Metz overlooks.⁸ In particular, the idea can be drawn from a passage in Tolstoy.

Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things?⁹

Metz objects to this remark that “death intuitively cannot undercut the worth of performing certain constructive actions. [...For example,] helping others can be worth doing, even though the helping agent will die and the helping action

⁸ I have already put forward the core idea of this section in Yoshizawa (2011, in Japanese). I focused there mainly on Metz (2003), in which he argues about the “Immortality Requirement” for meaningfulness. In the present paper, I make clearer and develop this idea and argue for it in a rather broader scope, in particular to cover the topics about external valuable things and the arguments that are developed further in Metz (2013).

⁹ Tolstoy (1905), p. 9. I do not attempt to say that Tolstoy indeed realized the idea I point out. Tolstoy may really be, as Metz interprets him (p. 242), a supernaturalist in terms of meaningfulness. However, if my argument in this paper is right, it is possible that Tolstoy himself eventually goes the wrong way about grasping his initial idea concerning death and meaning.

will have no infinite ramifications” (p. 128).¹⁰ Metz continues, “Tolstoy would have a stronger response to [...the criticism] if he could explain why it at first seems as though it is worthwhile for a mortal to help other mortals and why this judgment is false, upon further reflection” (p. 128). He then suggests that “Probably the strongest explanation is that while such activities seem to merit performance from an everyday perspective, from a broader perspective nothing is worth doing unless it will have an *ultimate consequence*” (p. 128, emphasis mine).¹¹ The point is that Metz here thinks that Tolstoy’s remark can be understood as being based on the idea of “ultimate consequence.” Metz then continues to argue (rightly) that even if an “ultimate consequence” is necessary for meaning, an eternal soul is not necessary for it (as seen in the last section). Now, I will show that there is a *seemingly* plausible explanation that does not appeal to the idea of “ultimate consequence.”

This *seemingly* plausible explanation is based on the idea that a person’s death itself makes her life meaningless.¹² To put it more precisely, the idea is that even if a person’s *life is meaningful*, this vanishes with her death (and this *appears* to mean meaninglessness). By contrast, Metz’s interpretation of Tolstoy’s remark is this: a person’s *life is meaningless* if she dies (that is, she is finite) because death is an obstacle for realizing or connecting with superlative infinite value, which is required for meaning. I will continue to amplify this idea.

Two kinds of death are at issue in Tolstoy’s passage above (and in Metz’s criticism of it). One is the death of the subject *S* of meaningfulness (“me”), and the other is the death of the valuable beings that are external to *S* (“my dear ones”), which can be called the “consequences” of *S*’s life.

First, in order to explain the relationship between *S*’s death and the meaningfulness of *S*’s life, we should look at the general condition between *S* and the meaning-making property *P*, which I introduced in Section 2, in more detail. Here, I focus on the kind of *P* such that when a person has *P* at a certain time *t*, her whole-life is meaningful, because Tolstoy’s concern seems to be

¹⁰ Metz refers here to Antony Flew’s remark (Flew 1966, p. 105).

¹¹ Metz refers here, for example, to Oswald Hanfling’s remark (Hanfling 1987, pp. 22–4). See also note 17 below about the relationship between the idea of “ultimate consequence” and “broader perspective,” which Metz suggests here.

¹² I write “seemingly” because I think, ultimately, that the idea that a person’s death itself makes her life meaningless, on which this explanation is based, is dubious, as we will see later, but even a dubious idea can motivate one to claim a certain view (just as a conclusion can be inferred validly even from false presumptions).

about whether his *whole-life* is meaningless and also, as we saw in the last section, the properties at issue with respect to soul-centered theory appears to be this kind of *P*. (I make brief remarks about another type of *P* later.) There is a form in which S's whole-life is meaningful by obtaining some *P* at a certain time *t*:

(1) S has some *P*.

However, there are two forms in which person S's life is *not* meaningful by virtue of lacking *P* at *t*:

(2) S does not have any *P*.

(3) S does not have any *P*, *because there is no such person*.

Form (2) means that S's life is meaningless, while (3) means that S is absent, more precisely, that S has no property at all at *t* because S does not exist at that time. Both of these could be expressed as the "lack" of meaning, in a sense.

Taking the anti-meaning-making property P^A into consideration, the corresponding forms would be as follows:

(1') S has some *P* (and does not have any P^A).

(2') S has some P^A .

(3') S has *neither* any *P* *nor* any P^A , because there is no such person.

The difference between (2') and (3') is clearer with respect to P^A : (3') means that S does not even have any P^A , while (2') means that S has some P^A .

Both (1) and (1') are normal forms of life's being meaningful and are equivalent to the negation of (2) and (2'), respectively. Moreover, S's immortality means the negation of (3) and (3'), not the negation of (2) and (2'), respectively. What should be stressed here is something we can guess from Tolstoy's passage, namely, that Tolstoy's family ("my dear ones") are some of the important beings that contribute to his life's meaning. It is natural to interpret the meaningfulness of Tolstoy's life as being a connection to an earthly and (relatively) *usual* value in this context, rather than as being a connection to a kind of *superlative* value. To put it more plainly, while Metz interprets immortality as an instrument or a condition of meaningfulness, I think of

immortality not as a condition of meaningfulness, but as the negation of a “lack” or “loss” of meaningfulness by death.

A similar line can be used for the deaths of external valuable beings like “the dear ones” (hereafter “D”):

- (1”) D has some value *V*.
- (2”) D does not have any *V*.
- (3”) D does not have any *V*, because D does not exist.

The immortality of D is the denial of (3”). The cases where the valuable external things are not persons but, for example, great artworks or great pieces of literature, may be treated in a similar way (while their annihilations are not said to be “deaths”).

Now, the questions of “why it at first seems as though it is worthwhile for a mortal to help other mortals” and “why this judgment is false, upon further reflection” (p. 128), which are the two parts of the Metz’s objection against Tolstoy, would *seem to be* explained without appealing to the idea of “ultimate consequence.” The answer to the first question, which Metz would also agree with, is this: because human lives have value in themselves and to help such mortals is meaningful in itself. The answer to the second question, which Metz overlooks, is this: because these *valuable* beings D vanished by their deaths, then the relation with D does not hold (because one of the relata does not exist); in turn, the relational property *P*, *being connected properly with D*, is no longer instantiated, and eventually the very subject *S* of *P* vanished by virtue of *S*’s own death. Besides, in Tolstoy’s passage, an attitudinal element of the others (“sooner or later be forgotten”) is also at issue and can be explained along a similar line. What is feared about being forgotten here? Does this fear come from the idea that *staying remembered* has (or is an instrument of) superlative value or the idea that the longer it stays remembered the larger amount of value it brings? Perhaps not. What is feared about being forgotten seems to be an already *valuable* thing. This observation appears to accord with the fact that Tolstoy’s life seems meaningful when he writes this passage. As I see it, it is plausible to think that he undergoes a thought process as follows: He finds that all *valuable* things for him will be “lost” because they will die or disappear. And because of this fact, he feels sorrow and loses his zest for life. Then, he claims that his life is meaningless. In a process like this, one would crave (wrongly, as I

see it) immortality in order to realize a meaningful life.¹³

The idea that a person's death makes her life meaningless can be called "naturalistic nihilism," which I think is involved in Tolstoy's remark, while Metz sees Tolstoy's view as a "supernaturalistic nihilism."¹⁴ I think that this idea about death and meaning is key to fully understanding the rationales of soul-centered theory and therefore key to rejecting them.

5. Existence and the Meaning of Life

A Tolstoian kind of concern about meaning can be related to the well-known idea of the importance of "leav[ing] longstanding 'traces' behind upon our death" (p. 247),¹⁵ and it is *not* necessarily connected to supernatural eternity, as Metz rightly argues, albeit peripherally (13.4). I conclude this paper by making a few remarks about "traces," which are thought to be typical things with external (perhaps objective) value.

One might think from my argument that I maintain that, to seek a long-term continuity of the traces or the subject of meaningfulness misses the point with regard to meaning in life. However, it is certainly an oversimplification to say that existence itself is *the* matter of meaning in life and that continuity is then irrelevant to the question of meaning. Indeed, there are cases in which continuity is important. We should perhaps hurry and not procrastinate in finding truly valuable things and engage with them, simply because we mortals do not have much time. Besides, some events that occur after one's own death or the survival of the others (or humankind as such) can be important as external things (if not necessary) for our personal meaningfulness or other personal values.¹⁶ Nonetheless, I want to emphasize that there is at least one other matter. Our concern about existence and meaning may arise even in a person who is free from the above possible obstacles about continuity to realize a meaningful life.

¹³ It seems easy to see that a similar line can be used in order to explain why we want to transcend our temporal limit. Besides, one aspect of "realizing justice" might be understood in essentially the same way. If death itself is the tragedy of life, only immortality itself is thought to be immune from it (and not compensation for it).

¹⁴ Metz writes that soul-centered theory is compatible with nihilism (p. 124). That is, assuming soul-centered theory, if there is no soul, then nihilism is true. If my argument in this paper is right, however, the story seems the other way round: Naturalistic nihilism comes first, and the craving (wrongly, as I see it) for supernatural valuable things follows.

¹⁵ Metz ascribes this expression of "traces" to Robert Nozick (1981, esp. p. 582).

¹⁶ For example, recall Samuel Scheffler's unorthodox notion of "the collective afterlife," which is contrasted with "the personal afterlife" (Scheffler 2013, esp. pp. 15–6, 64).

The concern is over the disappearance of our lives in the end, whether they are meaningful or not.¹⁷

However, I do not attempt to claim here that the idea that a person's death itself makes her life meaningless is true. I do not think that death really makes life meaningless, because it is dubious that (3) (and (3')) implies meaninglessness. It is different from (2) (and (2')), which surely do imply meaninglessness. On the one hand, when (2) is realized, S's meaningful state come to an end and S is in a meaningless state; on the other hand, when (3) is realized, S is in *neither* a meaningful state *nor* a meaningless state.¹⁸

Furthermore, especially in cases where the *P* at issue is the kind of property such that the time of obtaining *P* corresponds to the time of life's having meaning, even though we may refer to (3) (and (3')) as "meaninglessness," this may not matter with respect to meaning. After one's death, what matters appears to be whether the life *was* meaningful, not whether it *is* meaningful, as Metz argues about whether or not "Hitler's life *was* meaningful" (pp. 5, 26, emphasis mine), "Gauguin's life *was* meaningful" (p. 191, emphasis mine), and "Mandela's life *was* meaningful" (p. 228, emphasis mine).¹⁹ In addition, a person may be able to have some *P* after her death (for example, *being admired on the occasion of the eventual completion of the Sagrada Familia*); if so, her life would become meaningful posthumously (cf. p. 70).

My point is, however, that even if the idea that a person's death itself makes

¹⁷ This sort of concern is often related to the idea of meaninglessness from the point of view of the universe (13.3). But the nothingness of death can be captured by a much more narrow perspective. So I think that the scale or the depth of objectivity is irrelevant, or at least there is another point. The point is existence (of valuable being) itself.

¹⁸ In some cases, S's death could make her life meaningless. With respect to the kind of *P* that makes S's whole-life meaningful, there are two ways in which S's life is meaningless: one is that S never gets *P* and the other is that she loses *P* that she had once possessed. It is possible to say, in a sense, that S's death could make her life meaningless in the former way, when S's life ends before S gets *P* (in other words, during S's lifetime, (2) is true at all times). However, that there could be some such cases does not mean that death *generally* makes all people's lives meaningless. What I want to elicit as Tolstoian nihilism is the *general* claim that S "loses" *P* by her death in the latter way, that is, the claim that (3) means S's lack of *P* (while I finally claim that (3) does not mean meaninglessness). It is worth emphasizing here that this clarification of the point of Tolstoian nihilism is based on the distinction between (2) and (3) and, in turn, on the materials of the metaphysics of person and its properties, not life and its properties, which I introduced in Section 2.

¹⁹ One might think that it is better to express Tolstoian nihilism as the idea that the life was meaningful until (or more properly, only before) it ended. An anonymous reviewer makes this line of suggestion. I think that, however, by making the idea a little clearer, it turns out to be either not different from mine, or else problematic. If the idea is that the life was meaningful until it ended *and it is meaningless after death*, the point is nothing but what I want to bring up. If the idea is that the life's past meaningfulness makes the life "meaningless" on her death, the idea seems not to make sense.

her life meaningless is dubious, it is deep and familiar. A parallel idea is one of the main topics in the arguments about the *evil of death*. A branch of Epicureanism maintains that death is *neither bad nor good* for the one who dies, because after S's death, S no longer exists, and relations between events and S, such as "is bad (good) for" or even "was bad (good) for," do not hold.²⁰ Furthermore, sometimes the nothingness of death itself is said to be fearful. According to Aristotle, "[D]eath is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and *nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead*" (*Nicomachean Ethics* III, 1115a, emphasis mine). On the other hand, sometimes the nothingness of death (Frances Kamm calls it "the Extinction Factor" of death) is even said to be *bad*.²¹ So, we should take the idea seriously. (A line of argument against it would be based on the distinction between (2) and (3), as previously noted.)

I attempt to agree with Metz that naturalistic objectivism is on the right track as a theory of meaningfulness (and indeed it is now the most common sort of view), but I am not satisfied with his treatment of the relationship between (non)existence and meaning. As I stated above, our concern about existence and meaning is deep. On the other hand, I suspect that we know well what is valuable in our own life (while we sometimes lose sight of them in a lot of unimportant things). So, I am optimistic, in a sense, that the answers to the question of meaning will be revealed to be not so demanding, once we have got rid of the "metaphysical" concern about existence and meaning. When we

²⁰ See, as criticism of this view, Bradley (2009), pp. 81–3. This view is often thought to be based on the metaphysical framework of *presentism*, according to which only present things exist and those that have ceased to exist (relative to time) literally do not exist at all. Peter Singer replies to the Tolstoian concern about meaninglessness (and morality) as follows, appealing to the metaphysical framework of four-dimensionalism (more precisely, *eternalism*): "If we regard time as a fourth dimension, then we can think of the universe, throughout all the times at which it contains sentient life, as a four-dimensional entity. We can then make that four-dimensional world a better place by causing there to be less pointless suffering in one particular place, at one particular time, than there would otherwise have been" (Singer 1997, p. 274). Singer's aim here can be understood as showing that our "consequences" do not cease to exist *in a sense* even when they disappear (relative to time). The point is that being placed somewhere in four-dimensional space-time does not mean *eternity* or the transcendence of temporality. In other words, the point is not eternity but existence itself. I think that Singer's remark certainly captures the point of one of the concerns about meaning, which is essentially related to the concept of existence and time.

²¹ Kamm (1998), pp. 43–4. According to Kamm, the badness consists in "the factor of the possibility being all over of more of a life in the direction in which time moves" (Kamm 1998, p. 43). Theo Van Willigenburg writes, "This threat of complete extinction arouses terror in us and is a major motive for belief in an after-life" (Van Willigenburg 2001, p. 34). He clearly distinguishes this "badness" from the evil of death as the "deprivation" of possible goods (cf. Bradley 2009).

understand (rightly) that the meaning of our life and external values are not threatened even if they do not continue over a very long period of time, we need not be disturbed about our everyday, “tiny” meaning. I think that dissolving such a concern is one of the most important tasks of philosophers (in particular anti-nihilists such as Metz (and me)) with respect to the question of meaning in life.²²

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²² The manuscript with the earliest version of the core idea of this paper was presented in a seminar at Keio University, Japan, for young analytic metaphysicians. I would like to thank the participants, and especially Takashi Yagisawa, who was invited as the guest commentator. Additionally, I am grateful to Ryo Chonabayashi, Tatsuya Kashiwabata, Naoaki Kitamura, Tatsuya Murayama, Kazunobu Narita, Taku Tanikawa and Kuniaki Tawara for their helpful comments and discussions, and also to the anonymous reviewer for the suggestions and comments.

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Metz' Incoherence Objection

Some Epistemological Considerations

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Abstract

In his *Meaning in Life*, Thaddeus Metz puts a certain argument – the ‘incoherence objection’ – to a number of different uses. The incoherence objection states that attempts to establish knowledge of the truth of certain conditionals will, in conjunction with some uncontroversial knowledge claims, commit us to decidedly controversial ones. Given that we do not wish to be so committed, it follows that we cannot claim to know the truth of those conditionals. This article seeks to examine some of the underlying epistemological assumptions of such an argument, raising potential problems to work on and locating areas where the argument might be refined or clarified. Although the considerations raised are for the most part general, specific issues concerning epistemic transmission principles are canvassed as regards the argument’s application to a particular view of life’s meaning associated with John Cottingham.

1. Introduction

Thaddeus Metz’ *Meaning in Life* is a rich discussion of meaningfulness, impressively covering a large amount of ground without sacrificing depth in its treatment of the questions. It will doubtless provide material for philosophers working in this area to think through for many years to come. It is testament to the thought-provoking nature of the book that my own discussion focuses on just a few pages, but at some length; there was a great deal to say even about this short section. I still do not think I have exhausted it, but I hope that the issues I raise in this article will profitably open up further avenues to a consideration of the theoretical context of some of Metz’ views – particularly the epistemological context.

2. The Incoherence Objection and Cottingham’s Response

I would like to discuss an argument that Metz puts to a number of different

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uses, but first appears as an objection to John Cottingham's claim that a theistic worldview best grounds the type of universal, objective, necessary and normative morality that is required for meaningfulness in life. Metz' claim is that this position leads to a logical incoherence in Cottingham's views, and in the views of most of the rest of those who would embrace Cottingham's claim. To explain this he outlines the following principle (A): If I know that X obtains, and I know that 'If X, then Y' is true, then I know that Y obtains.¹ Applying this principle, Metz holds that Cottingham's claim to know that (1) 'Wrongness exists', to know that (2) 'If wrongness exists, then God exists', but not to know that (3) 'God exists' is an incoherent one. If Cottingham (or anyone else) wants to persist in claiming to know the truth of the claim that 'A theistic worldview grounds ethics' he must either claim to know that God exists, or deny knowing that wrongness exists. Metz adduces textual evidence from Cottingham's writings to indicate that Cottingham is unwilling to embrace the latter two claims, but is anxious to indicate his argument's wider reach: if one thinks one knows that wrongness is real, but can doubt that God exists, one cannot claim to know that wrongness logically depends on God. This is quite an important argument for Metz, as elsewhere he uses versions of it to criticise supernaturalism about meaning (p.145), non-naturalism about meaning (p.158), and consequentialism about meaning (p.194). Given this, and the fact that the argument seems to be one that has a very general application outside of Metz' work and would lead to a number of quite startling conclusions, I will spend some time discussing it. I will consider the version raised against Cottingham here, but I think that most of the questions I raise about it will apply *mutatis mutandis* to the versions Metz presents elsewhere (though not all – the discussion of transmissivity with which I conclude is specific to the version raised against Cottingham).

Metz considers a counterexample from Cottingham, who claims that he can maintain that apples are constituted by quarks, yet be much more confident of the evidence that apples exist than of the evidence that quarks do. Metz still finds this incoherent, on the basis that if one has enough evidence to know that apples exist, and to know that if apples exist, then quarks exist, one cannot consistently claim one does not have enough evidence to know that quarks exist. He diagnoses Cottingham's error in the latter's use of the word 'confidence',

¹ Metz (2013), p.89. I have reconstructed this from the inconsistent triad Metz gives there.

insofar as this allows evidence to be inconclusive, as opposed to knowledge, which requires that evidence be conclusive. The idea is that one might consistently claim the conditional ‘If wrongness exists, God exists’ is true whilst being very confident in the truth of the antecedent, and less confident in the truth of the consequent. But Metz’ principle (A) refers to knowledge, not confidence, and one cannot consistently make the *mutatis mutandis* claim.

Those versed in epistemology will observe that (A) is in some ways very similar to, yet is also importantly different from, a simple epistemic closure principle. Such a principle states that all members of a given epistemic set (say, ‘x’s warranted beliefs’) bear a given relation (say, entailment) only to other members of that set – the set is ‘closed’ under that relation. Examination of certain facets of closure principles can help in our assessment of Metz’ argument. First we must observe that, as it stands, (A) needs some tweaking, for it is quite possible that I fail to follow through all the consequences of my knowledge, through laziness, or stupidity, or being distracted or somesuch. This can easily be resolved by adding that I competently deduce the fact of Y’s obtaining from X’s obtaining and from the fact that if X is true then Y is true. However, I take the thrust of Metz’ argument to be that the evidence for wrongness and for Cottingham’s conditional *transmits* warrant, and hence (I am assuming here) justification, to the proposition that God exists. So we have here not just an epistemic closure principle, but, more strongly, an epistemic transmission principle. So we need to add to (A) not only that I make the relevant deduction, but that I know that Y obtains *in virtue of* knowing that X obtains and the truth of the conditional. Note that it is the addition of this ‘in virtue of’ that distinguishes a transmission principle from a closure principle; whilst a closure principle merely tells us that if X obtains (and the conditional is true) Y obtains, a transmission principle will tell us *why* Y obtains – namely, in virtue of X’s obtaining (and the conditional being true). Call (A) with these tweaks ‘(A*)’ (further tweaks are possible, and probably necessary, but are not salient for present purposes). Now, I think that Metz is right in holding that there appears to be no obvious transmission failure² if we apply (A*) to the apples and quarks case, so denying that (A*) applies is not a way out, unless one can point to a difference between the apple case and the God case which means that the latter exemplifies transmission failure and the former does not. In fact, I think that

² ‘Transmission failure’ denotes a case where, for one reason or another, an argument fails to transmit warrant from its premise(s) to its conclusion.

there is such a difference, and that the God case, unlike the apple case, *does* involve transmission failure, but that this fact may not be as helpful to Cottingham as it first appears. Given this, I will postpone discussion of transmission failure until the end of this article.

One may have other concerns about the incoherence objection. Metz appears to overlook that Cottingham has said (in the same paragraph in which he makes the apples/quarks analogy) that he does not wish to think of his arguments for a theistic ground of ethics as ‘conclusive’,³ and so presumably, *contra* Metz (p.88), he does not think he *knows* the conditional, he merely takes a weaker attitude toward it, like holding it to be true, or having a certain degree of justified belief in it (this is suggested by Cottingham’s claim that he ‘maintains’ the conditional, rather than ‘knows’ it). This would prevent the application of Metz’ principle, the price paid being that Cottingham must accept that his arguments for a supernaturalist theory of life’s meaning do not conclusively refute alternate views. I imagine, given the tenor of Cottingham’s work, that this will not be a great worry for him (his apples/quarks example may indicate that, by analogy, he takes his arguments for the conditional to be abductive-style reasoning, whereby theism is the best out of its competitors at explaining ethics, but cannot be said to be the only option), or anyone who is not convinced that many, if any, philosophical arguments are conclusive, although it may worry other upholders of theistic grounds for ethics more.

3. Fallibilism

Another perspective to take on Metz’ argument would be to examine the distinction Metz draws between being confident in a proposition’s truth and knowing it to be true. Insofar as Metz claims that knowledge requires conclusive evidence, he seems to be embracing an infallibilist epistemology.⁴ On the other hand, it is plausible, given Cottingham’s claims about gradations of confidence in evidence, to take the latter to be espousing a fallibilist (and internalist, although I am not sure anything turns on this) epistemology. Infallibilism in epistemology roughly claims that, in order to be said to know a given

³ Cottingham (2008), p.266. Of course, Metz may omit discussion of this point due to lack of space – it is not possible to cover everything one wants to talk about in a single book.

⁴ Although Metz does sometimes use the phrase ‘conclusive reason(s)’ in an epistemic context, I do not take him to be advocating a (controversial) Dretske-style epistemology; his acceptance of degrees of justification (see later in this section) and of closure both do not sit well with such a view.

proposition to be true, one's justification for it must be so good that one cannot rationally doubt that proposition. Fallibilism claims the opposite – one can be said to know a true proposition for which one's justification is nevertheless not conclusive. Looked at from the point of view of a fallibilist internalist epistemology, however, multi-premise closure principles (let alone transmission principles) of justification, and thus knowledge, famously give rise to problems, insofar as they seem to lead to lottery paradoxes and the paradox of the preface.⁵ The appearance of these paradoxes is often taken to suggest that such principles fail in this context. The claim is that when knowledge is fallible, if we conjoin enough claims for which we take ourselves to have sufficient justification to count as knowing, we might nevertheless not take ourselves to have sufficient justification for their conjunction to know that conjunction (and likewise for a proposition entailed by this conjunction, which is important for our current discussion) – this is due to the small amount of epistemic risk pertaining to each claim accumulating for the conjunction of them.⁶ (A*) is one of these aforementioned suspect multi-premise principles, although it is, of course, not a very extensive multi-premise transmission principle.⁷ But to make anything out of this latter point would require some principled way of explaining how many premises a transmission principle may legitimately have. Moreover, in the context of arguing that single-premise closure (and by extension single-premise transmission) is just as problematic as multi-premise closure, Maria Lassonen-Aarnio has claimed that the competent deduction required in a principle like (A*) will not require infallibility and so will itself add some epistemic risk (which she calls 'deductive risk').⁸ Not only will this lead to the possibility of multi-premise transmission principle paradoxes affecting single premise transmission principles, as Lassonen-Aarnio thinks, but it will increase the risk

⁵ In this context, take a fallibilism that claims that one knows a proposition only if one's justification for it makes its truth probable to a degree of 0.99 or higher. Very briefly, the lottery paradox will affect such a fallibilism in the following way. Imagine a lottery with 100 tickets, one winner and a fair draw. For each ticket number n , the probability of the proposition 'Ticket number n will lose' will be justified sufficiently to be known. From this we can, with the acceptance of some plausible epistemic principles, conclude that no ticket will win. But this contradicts our knowledge that one ticket will win, hence the paradox. Incidentally, note that I say 'of justification, *and thus* knowledge' in this sentence as I agree with Luper (2012) that attempts to break the link between justification and knowledge in this context are ad hoc. Of course, Metz may disagree.

⁶ On this, see Collins (2015), section 1. c.

⁷ Nevertheless, it *is* a multi-premise principle. On this, see Sharon and Spectre (2013), p.2734, footnote 7.

⁸ Lassonen-Aarnio (2008).

accumulated under seemingly low-risk, few-premised multi-premised transmission principles like (A*). Finally, we would also have to ask where the justification threshold for knowledge was; if the answer to this is vague, it may make it harder to use our intuitions about what we think we know to demonstrate a logical incoherence in Cottingham's position.

Transcending these messy details, the moral is that on fallibilism (taking into account the connection between probability and knowledge), highly likely premises, sufficient in likelihood for knowledge, can entail a conclusion that is not sufficient in likelihood for knowledge due to the accumulation of epistemic risk, so even if Cottingham were to claim he did know the conditional, yet not that God existed, his position would not display a *logical* incoherence, as Metz claims.⁹ (So, even were I to be mistaken about Metz' infallibilism and he in fact accepts a fallibilist epistemology, this will not allow him to convict Cottingham of such an incoherence.) Now, depending on the level of epistemic risk one assigns to the premises, Metz' argument may well locate greater or lesser tension in such a position – where the less the tension the more implausibly great the level of epistemic risk one is taken to tolerate for the premises. Certain comments from Metz suggest that he may be amenable to constructing a weaker argument along these lines: he sometimes talks of the strength of the evidence for a God-based ethic needing to be only comparable, rather than equal, to that of God's existence.¹⁰ And he posits that, for theists who maintain that they do know God's existence, he might grant this but reformulate his objection to invoke 'a large discrepancy in the degree of justification for believing in God relative to that for believing in meaning [or wrongness]'.¹¹ Whilst we should agree that a weaker argument along these lines avoids the problem of epistemic risk, moving from a claim of incoherence to a claim of tension does lessen the dialectical force of the objection. So many of the words used in constructing the objection and assessing its force will be vague ('risk', 'comparable', 'justification') that, coupled with the considerations about transmission in section 5, a weaker objection may be hard to press (though obviously this will vary from individual to individual).

⁹ Cf. Metz (2013), p.88 and p.94 for his claims of specifically logical incoherence.

¹⁰ Metz (2013), p.88.

¹¹ Metz (2013), p.146, footnote 3. I am not sure that objection can be reformulated in this context, as given that, for Metz, knowledge must be based on conclusive evidence, and evidence is either conclusive or it is not (being conclusive is not a property that comes in degrees), there can be no discrepancy in the degree of the justifying evidence. One cannot be more than certain.

Now, of course, there have been various ways mooted in the literature to maintain both fallibilism and multi-premise closure principles, so the foregoing does not show that Cottingham or others can just ignore (A*). However, all of these methods have to do *something* with both the epistemic paradoxes and the plausible intuition that, on fallibilism, epistemic risk increases as we add fallibly known premises (an intuition that Metz seems to share, insofar as he concedes that if we focus on ‘confidence’ rather than ‘knowledge’ his argument fails), and unless what they do with these manages to reconcile fallibilism and multi-premise closure principles *and* preserve Metz’ argument, that argument cannot be said to have isolated a logical incoherence in Cottingham’s view. It is, it would seem, incumbent on Metz to produce an epistemological theory which can accomplish all this in order to press his argument.

Maybe Metz can just reject Cottingham’s fallibilism. Aside from putting a (substantial) theoretical price tag on his argument, such an embrace of infallibilism may have other unattractive consequences. Metz seems to think that his own naturalistic grounding of morality is immune to a *tu quoque* objection of logical incoherence, since ‘[v]irtually no one disputes that there is a material world’.¹² I take him here to mean that his position satisfies (A*), as he knows that morality exists, he knows that morality is a function of natural properties, and so he knows what this entails: that there are natural properties. But does Metz know all these things on infallibilism? He claims that knowledge requires having ‘conclusive evidence’, but it is hard to see how he acquires such evidence for the material world’s existence just from the sociological fact that virtually no one disputes this claim. In order to claim that he has conclusive evidence for this claim, Metz would have to conclusively refute idealism, solipsism and scepticism about the external world (Metz own principle (A*) is, of course, handy in formulating this point). It is just the sort of difficulties that one has in doing this that have provided part of the motivation for fallibilist construals of knowledge. Metz also denies that we have inconclusive evidence that wrongness exists. In doing so he appeals to Cottingham’s claim that, say, cruelty is not just wrong if wrongness exists, but is in fact wrong, on the basis that wrong actions such as cruelty are wrong in all possible worlds. Metz seems to take this to amount to an explicit denial that there is merely inconclusive evidence that wrongness exists.¹³ But I am not sure that I see how this follows

¹² Metz (2013), p.159.

¹³ Metz (2013), p.90.

(or that Cottingham meant his claim to establish this). Someone who doubts that wrongness exists in this world (that is to say, they doubt that cruelty is really objectively wrong, and instead explain our moral intuitions via some kind of error theory, for example) need not find their doubts assuaged by being told that, if wrongness exists in this world, it exists in all other worlds. They might even find their doubts increased, as the latter claim is much stronger! Even if true, Metz' statement that most debate in moral philosophy is not about whether wrongness exists, but about its nature and epistemology once again seems to tell us less about wrongness and more about what moral philosophers are interested in; certainly, by itself it does not provide the conclusive evidence that an infallibilist would take to be required for knowledge. Finally, both the claim that wrongness exists and the claim that the material world exists seem to have much more evidential support to me than Metz' claim that naturalism can ground morality (even if we suppose the evidence for the latter to be pretty good). Given this, Metz' own position does not satisfy principle (A*) (as he seems to suggest it does) because, according to epistemological standards whereby one must have conclusive evidence, he does not know either his two premises or his conclusion.

4. A Successful *Tu Quoque* Argument?

This shows that Metz' own way to avoid a *tu quoque* argument is unsuccessful. Metz would avoid the logical incoherence claim, not because his conclusion is known, as are both of his premises, but because his conclusion is *not* known, as are both of his premises. According to such epistemological standards, Cottingham's position will avoid the logical incoherence claim for the same reasons. This would leave Metz and Cottingham's positions in the same boat, as regards the incoherence objection – but Metz' argument against Cottingham just *was* the incoherence objection. Problems do not end there, however. Cottingham might attempt to mount a successful *tu quoque* attack on Metz' naturalistic grounding of morality using fallibilist epistemological standards. At first, the prospects for this look bleak, as on fallibilism it appears as though Metz does know that natural properties exist, which is presumably the counterpart to the claim that Cottingham does not think he knows, namely that God exists. But suppose we restructure some of Metz' claims. We (fallibly) know that wrongness exists. We also know the following entailment: if

wrongness exists, then a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is correct.¹⁴ So, to avoid violating (A*) (and bracketing my earlier remarks about the accumulation of epistemic risk over premises), we must know that a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is correct. Now, Metz only says that ‘nature could plausibly ground such an [objective] ethic’,¹⁵ which suggests to me that, even on fallibilism, he may not believe that he knows this conclusion (I myself find a number of propositions plausible, but I would want to stop short of saying that I (even fallibly) knew them to be true). And more generally, I do not think that many of us would want to say that we *know* that a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is correct, still less the rather complex Cornell meta-ethical realism that Metz thinks is the right one. Or, to speak in terms of comparability, I do not think my justification for believing Cornell meta-ethical realism to be correct is comparable to my justification for believing that torturing an innocent child for fun is wrong (even given Metz’ arguments for the former). If this is so, then we display the same sort of incoherence as Metz claims Cottingham does. Of course it is open to Metz to claim that he never said he knew the entailment ‘If wrongness exists, then a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is true’. This is essentially Cottingham’s move, and so it will lead to dialectical parity.¹⁶

It seems to me that the reason why we have to restructure Metz’ claims to produce the *tu quoque* argument lies in the difference between divine command ethics and naturalistic ethics. In the case of the former, if we, with Metz, leave Euthyphro problems aside, the difficulty is always liable to be the ontological claim (that God exists), rather than the grounding claim (that God grounds objective ethics). In the case of the latter, matters are reversed; the hard doctrine is not the ontological one (that natural properties exist), but the grounding claim (that natural properties can ground rightness and wrongness). When Metz outlines the position that he alleges Cottingham is incoherent in accepting he suppresses the less controversial grounding claim: ‘Wrongness exists. If wrongness exists, then [theistic grounding is true, which entails that] God exists.

¹⁴ I take Metz’ arguments (in particular, the incoherence objection) against both supernaturalist and non-naturalist attempts to ground wrongness to be attempts to establish this conditional, along with any arguments/presumptions in favour of naturalism as a metaphysical thesis.

¹⁵ Metz (2013), p.97.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, this would be a rather odd move for Metz to make, as it would seem to imply that the incoherence objection, by which he hopes to rule out alternatives to naturalistic grounding, is inconclusive.

Therefore God exists.’ When I outline the position that I allege Metz is incoherent in accepting I suppress the less controversial ontological claim (given here in square brackets): ‘Wrongness exists. If wrongness exists, then naturalistic grounding is true [which entails that natural properties exist]. Therefore naturalistic grounding is true.’ Moreover, it is notable that both Cottingham and Metz offer arguments to support their respective grounding claims, and neither offer arguments to support their ontological claims (although elsewhere in his work Cottingham argues that God’s existence is at least consistent with our total evidence, *contra* some of Metz’ expressed reasons for doubting God¹⁷), which does put Cottingham in a dialectically weaker position: Metz is bolstering his vulnerable flank with arguments, whereas Cottingham is merely further bolstering his well-defended flank (although in doing so he is aiming arguments against Metz’ grounding claim).

5. Psychological Doubt vs. Rational Doubt

Another possibility might be for Metz to say that he has given arguments for his conditional and for the existence of wrongness, and the evidential force of these arguments transmit, in accordance with (A*), to his conclusion; it is irrational not to say that one knows it given this. As I said above, it seems that Metz would not want to say this, but he could change his mind – as could Cottingham (alternatively they could both change their minds and say that the application of (A*) would just provide us with reason to doubt that wrongness exists). Were the latter to regiment his claims so as to conform them to (A*), he would present something very much like a moral argument for the existence of God of the type used, for example, by William Lane Craig (although Craig typically says that his premises are just more worthy of belief than their denial, and so transmit the commensurate level of evidence).¹⁸ In a footnote, Metz considers the suggestion of Roger Crisp that this possibility can be applied to Cottingham, but I do not follow his response: he seems to indicate that this

¹⁷ Metz (2013), p.243.

¹⁸ Craig outlines his moral argument for God in his (2008), pp.172-183. It is interesting to note that, if we were to take this regimentation of claims in response to Metz’ use of the incoherence argument against supernaturalism about *meaning*, we could say that Metz has devised a new argument for the existence of God from meaningfulness! It is also necessary to carefully assess other reasons for and against believing in the existence of God; Metz perfectly understandably does not want to spend time doing this, but a proper discussion (rather than an appeal to what many philosophers think – Metz (2013), p. 146) cannot be postponed indefinitely.

possibility cannot be used by Cottingham as most of us are unsure of the claim that if wrongness exists, then God exists. Further, continues Metz, Cottingham's work gains importance insofar as it defends that claim so powerfully. But surely whether we are unsure of the conditional claim is not a problem for *Cottingham*, as, on Metz' interpretation, the former does take himself to know this? Moreover, as Metz observes, Cottingham has given us arguments to *establish* that we know this conditional, and so it may be unjustified to be unsure of the claim, depending on how successful those arguments are. Metz' main objection against Cottingham's conditional is his incoherence objection, which the possibility we are currently considering is a response against; it thus would beg the question to assert that this response fails because of the incoherence objection alone.

One way of mitigating some of the counterintuitive nature of these sorts of 'newly discovered knowledge' responses is to note the difference that the tweaks that alter Metz' principle (A) to principle (A*) make; specifically, the difference made by altering the principle from a closure principle to a transmission principle (perhaps Metz will disagree with this alteration to a stronger principle, but I cannot see on what grounds he would). This makes a difference when we consider the difference between psychological doubt and rational doubt; supposing Kripkean semantics to be true (as Metz does¹⁹), it may be possible for me to psychologically doubt that water is H₂O, but it is not possible for me to rationally doubt it (the reason for this might be explained by, for example, using David Chalmers' distinction between *prima facie* and ideally conceiving that water is not H₂O; we can do the former, but not the latter²⁰). If we baldly ask someone whether they know all of the three claims Metz attributes to Cottingham, in accordance with closure (Metz' own un-tweaked principle (A)), but omitting any mention of evidence transmission, they might find it easier to psychologically doubt the claim Metz singles out for doubt than if we made evidence transmission salient (in accordance with the tweaked principle (A*)), even though they cannot rationally doubt the conclusion in either case (assuming we set aside accumulation of epistemic risk). Further support for this may come from considering that Metz' argument is one based on *logical* incoherence, and logical modelling of our epistemic practices frequently has to deal with the problem of (lack of) logical omniscience; epistemic agents typically do not follow through the logical consequences of all their beliefs or knowledge (as

¹⁹ Metz (2013), p.91.

²⁰ On Chalmers' distinction, see his (2002), pp.147-149.

was indicated by the first tweak I had to make to (A)), and so certain conclusions may come as a surprise to them, and as initially counterintuitive. However, in being taken through their reasoning and showing how the evidence transmits, it may be that the epistemic agent will realise that they cannot rationally doubt the surprising conclusion, and, seeing how it follows from other propositions they have good reason to believe or to think they know, their initial sense of dubiousness about that conclusion will dissipate. Hence, I am suspicious of how much weight we can place on subjects' initial impressions of what they think they know out of a set of propositions we express baldly, tied together by a very simple epistemic closure principle: such a scenario leaves a lot of room for impressions tinted with a merely psychological doubt that may only be dissipated by allowing the epistemic agent to ruminate and 'live with' his or her new-found recognition of the connections between propositions (I think Cottingham might agree with this sort of point).

One way of marking this distinction between psychological and rational doubt would be to tie it to the familiar epistemological distinction between our doxastic warrant and our propositional warrant. This latter distinction is useful as it is a common observation that what we are justified in believing and what we take ourselves to be justified in believing are two different things. I have propositional warrant for p iff, given the evidence I possess, believing p is rational. I have doxastic warrant for p iff, on the actual evidence I take to myself to have for p , believing p is rational. With this distinction in place we can posit the possibility that someone who thinks they know that wrongness exists and that if wrongness exists then God exists, but does not think they know that God exists can coherently hold all of this if we are talking about knowledge insofar as it is doxastically warranted, but not insofar as it is propositionally warranted. Neither (A) nor (A*) are applicable to knowledge insofar as it is based on doxastic warrant. Of course, once we make that individual aware that their propositional warrant, which should conform to (A*), does not conform to it, they will want to make it so conform. But there is no set way as to *how* they go about doing that, at least, not without bringing in further substantive considerations that will affect that propositional warrant.

We might add that incoherence objections based on transmission principles like Metz' are dialectically quite strange. If one just states that, if one knows the premises of an argument but not the conclusion, then there must be something

wrong with one of the premises, this seems to license dogmatism.²¹ We must ask *why* one doubts the conclusion. If one cannot give a reason, then one's doubt in it is likely to be merely psychological. If one can give a reason (and Metz believes that he himself can), then one must transmit one's doubt to one of the premises, and furthermore, give reasons for one's doubt in that premise. Otherwise one would be doubting that premise, rather than another premise, or the premises of the reasons one has given for doubting the conclusion, irrationally, and this is just as bad as doubting the conclusion irrationally. Now, if one has reasons for one's doubt in the premise, one should give them, but Metz does not do this. His argument is the incoherence objection, but if, as the foregoing suggests, the incoherence objection will only have force if one has some substantive reasons against one of the premises anyway, the former objection drops out as irrelevant.

6. Transmission Failure

Earlier, I promised to return to the issue of transmission failure, and how it might affect the incoherence objection. The literature on transmission principles is steadily growing, and, within the confines of this article, I can only sketch some of the ideas and how they might relate to Metz' argument. In doing so my plan is to follow some of the discussion in Martin Davies' 'Two Purposes of Arguing and Two Epistemic Projects', which has the benefit of being both fairly self-contained and wide-ranging. We can begin by using Davies' distinction between the two epistemic projects mentioned in the title of his article to situate Metz' argument. Metz' account of what we take our epistemic attitudes to his three propositions to be seems closer to what Davies calls the epistemic project of 'deciding what to believe' than the epistemic project of 'settling the question'. That is to say, when we examine these propositions we are trying to tease out of the consequences of some of our beliefs, specifically here our belief that we know (1) and (2) and that we do not know (3). Metz' claim, remember, is that if we think we know (1) and (2), we must also say we know (3) in virtue of (1) and (2) transmitting their warrant to (3). However, this will only be true if the argument that has (1) and (2) as premises and (3) as a conclusion (henceforth: 'Argument (1)-(3)') does not exhibit transmission failure. Whether it does or not

²¹ Cf. Harman (1977), p.148, for the similar Kripke-Harman paradox of dogmatism.

will depend on how we understand transmission failure. Take Davies' first criterion for transmission failure based on Copi:

(C1) The warrant, W, to believe premise P1 of a valid argument with conclusion Q, is not transmitted from premise to conclusion if W depends on an antecedent warrant to believe Q.

Strictly speaking, I do not think Argument (1)-(3) does suffer from transmission failure according to this criterion. Whichever premise we take as P1, I fail to see that the warrant for (1) 'Wrongness exists' or (2) 'If wrongness exists, then God exists' requires an antecedent warrant to believe (3) 'God exists', at least in any obvious way.

That said, Davies offers a second criterion for transmission failure based on Copi which I think does apply to Argument (1)-(3), *viz*:

(C2) The warrant, W, to believe premise, P1 of a valid argument with conclusion Q, is not transmitted from premise to conclusion if W depends on an antecedent warrant to believe B, and there is a direct argument from B plus acceptance of P2 to Q.²²

First, why does Davies propose this criterion when he already has (C1)? Well, one factor that makes an argument less-than-well-suited (although not wholly unsuited) to the project of deciding what to believe is if it exhibits 'epistemic indirectness', that is, if it takes a gratuitous detour to its conclusion – it is needlessly indirect. Such an argument involves departing from the 'norm of conforming the structure of one's network of beliefs to the structure of the abstract space of warrants'.²³

Assuming we adopt (C2), Argument (1)-(3) fulfils the criterion in the following way. Take the premise (2) 'If wrongness exists, God exists'. I submit that the warrant brought forward for this premise is such that it depends on an antecedent warrant to believe a certain proposition, and there is a direct argument from that proposition to 'God exists'. So what is the warrant that is advanced for (2)? Metz provides a handy capsule summary of Cottingham's

²² Note that I have generalised Davies' formulations of (C1), (C2) and (J) to cover two-premised arguments, as the argument under discussion, Argument (1)-(3), is of this type.

²³ Davies (2009), p.373.

warrant for believing premise (2) in section 5.4 of *Meaning in Life*: the moral norms that allow for attributions of wrongness or rightness must be universal in scope, objective, necessary and normative, but only God has the required attributes to ground moral norms with these characteristics. I will not examine how certain attributes of God serve to ground certain of these characteristics of moral norms, with the exception of the one relevant to showing how Argument (1)-(3) exhibits transmission failure. Metz claims that, if God exists necessarily and could not change His mind, then any commands He gives that ground moral norms would be necessary, and so those norms would also be necessary. Such a claim is meant to provide warrant for (2). However, this warrant depends on an antecedent warrant to believe the proposition ‘It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists’. Since there is a direct argument from ‘It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists’ to (3) ‘God exists’, the conclusion of Argument (1)-(3), that argument meets the criterion for transmission failure according to (C2).

Let us look at these last two claims in more detail. Why does the warrant adduced to believe (2) require antecedent warrant to believe ‘It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists’? Well, if it is not possible that it necessarily be the case that God should exist, then it is not possible that God should, by means of the attributes He possesses, ground the necessity of moral norms. God, not being even possibly necessary, will not exist in some worlds, whereas moral norms, being putatively necessary, exist in all of them. A result of this is that God cannot be said to be an adequate ground of necessary moral norms (after all, Metz followed Cottingham in appealing to God’s necessary existence as the attribute required to effect His capacity to ground them). If this is so, then we have no warrant to believe (2) ‘If wrongness exists, then God exists’. Now, as for the second claim, acceptance of the proposition ‘A necessary being possibly exists’ amounts to conceding the controversial premise of the modal ontological argument proposed by philosophers such as Plantinga,²⁴ the conclusion of which is ‘God exists’, that is, (3). Assuming the majority view that the modal system of S5 captures the logic of our claims about metaphysical possibility and necessity, the following argument is valid: (O1) It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists, (O2) (Therefore) God exists.²⁵ (O2) is the same as (3). So there is a direct argument from ‘It is possible that it is

²⁴ Cf. Plantinga (1974), Chapter X.

²⁵ Cf. Oppy (1995), p.70.

necessarily the case that God exists', which is (necessarily part of) the warrant for (2), to (3), namely the conclusion of Argument (1)-(3). Hence Argument (1)-(3) conforms to (C2), and so fails to transmit warrant.

Before moving on to consider the implications of this, I also note that, for similar reasons, Argument (1)-(3) meets a different criterion for transmission failure that Davies bases on Jackson's work, rather than Copi's, *viz*:

(J) The warrant, W, to believe premise P1 of a valid argument with conclusion Q, is not transmitted from premise to conclusion if doubt about Q plus acceptance of P2 would directly rationally require acceptance of a defeating hypothesis for W.

Davies seeks to show that any argument meeting (C2) will meet (J). It will be enough to note that where W = 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists' (plus any other ancillary propositions that need to be added to this to constitute warrant for (2)), P1 = (2), P2 = (1) and Q = (3), doubt about (3) will indeed directly rationally require acceptance of a defeating hypothesis for 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists'. Why so? Well, if it is the case that God, if He exists, necessarily exists, then doubts about God's existence, that is, doubts about (3), will be doubts about it being necessarily the case that God exists. But if it must necessarily be the case that God exists if He exists at all (which must after all be true if God is to ground necessary moral norms), then a doubt about whether it be the case that God exists will be a doubt about whether it is possible that it necessarily be the case that God exists – in S5, if a necessary being does not exist in a given world, it will not exist in any possible world, and so will not possibly exist. Thus doubt about (3) leads to acceptance of a defeating hypothesis for 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists', namely, 'It is not possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists', and hence Argument (1)-(3) fits (J).

Davies also notes that, just as any argument that meets (C1) or (C2) will also meet (J), so any argument that meets (J) will meet (C1) or (C2)²⁶ provided that we also accept a certain thesis, (AW): If warrant to doubt a proposition B (warrant to believe not-B) would defeat the prima facie warrant to believe P provided by a putative warranting factor, F, then F can constitute a warrant to

²⁶ Davies (2009), p.374.

believe P only given an antecedent warrant to believe B. As we have seen Argument (1)-(3) meets (J), and so if we accept (AW), it will also meet (C1), contrary my initial impression.

There is a great deal more that can be said here, such as discussion of the credibility of (AW), comparison of Davies' accounts of transmission failure with others on the market, such as Crispin Wright's or Moretti and Piazza's, or examination of which kind of warrant is transmitted. But as I said earlier it will not be possible for me to outline or treat all of the aspects of the debate over transmission of epistemic warrant and how they relate to Metz' incoherence objection. My discussion here can only really be a first pass, which others may decide to take up or refine for themselves. Given this caveat, I will now go on to sketch what moral I think we can draw from the fact that Argument (1)-(3) is an example of transmission failure.

At first blush, it seems as though this fact will not help Cottingham (or anyone who takes the same view as him) very much. After all, if the warrant for 'If wrongness exists, then God exists', which Cottingham thinks he knows, entails 'God exists', then he also must know that God exists, and so there is indeed an incoherence in Cottingham's view, as Metz suggests (unless we take the points about epistemic risk above).²⁷ Argument (1)-(3) is an example of transmission failure because warrant is transmitted to its conclusion in a needlessly indirect way, rather than because no warrant is transmitted to it at all. But observing the non-transmissivity of Argument (1)-(3) allows the possibility of a different type of *tu quoque* objection to be issued against Metz: that he himself exemplifies a certain kind of logical incoherence. For Metz, like Cottingham, believes wrongness to exist, and to exist by necessity, and he takes Cottingham to be claiming that the existence of wrongness entails the existence of God, which would mean that God would exist by necessity also. So the concept of God that Metz ascribes to Cottingham is that of a metaphysically necessary being (rather than, say, a Swinburnian metaphysically contingent God).²⁸ However, Metz only seems to doubt the existence of this God, not to

²⁷ Note that it will not help for Cottingham to say he merely believes, rather than knows, the proposition 'If wrongness exists, then God exists', as all that is needed to run the ontological argument is the coherence of the concept of God as a necessary being. That this is Cottingham's concept follows from the necessity of moral truths and the view that God grounds those truths, both of which it seems Cottingham holds. Maybe he can rebut this charge by denying that wrongness is necessarily grounded in God, or necessarily grounded in anything – rather it is just most plausibly grounded in God.

²⁸ See, e.g., Metz (2013), p.94.

find the concept of such a God incoherent (if he thought the latter was the case, there would be no need to use his argument based on the (A*) principle).²⁹ As we have seen, to find the concept of a necessary being coherent is to grant the contested premise of Plantinga's modal version of the ontological argument, by which it would follow that Metz is committed to claiming knowledge of God's existence, contra his expressed doubts. Hence it may be possible to charge Metz with incoherence insofar as he allows the possibility of God as a necessary being, yet doubts that God exists in actuality.

7. Conclusion

None of the issues I raise in this article strike me as dispositive of Metz' incoherence objection. Rather they appear to me to need a number of iterations, developing, countering and re-framing, before their actual impact can be adequately assessed. Nevertheless my hope is that this treatment provides at least a starting point for the process of such an assessment.³⁰

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²⁹ Support for this interpretation seems to come from Metz (2013), p.91, pp.242-243.

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Meaning in Consequences

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Abstract

This paper aims to respond on behalf of consequentialist theories of meaning in life to criticisms raised by Thaddeus Metz and, in doing so, demonstrates how the debate over theories of meaning in life might make progress. By using conceptual resources developed for consequentialist theories of morality, I argue that Metz's general arguments against consequentialist theories of meaning in life fail. That is, some consequentialist theories can accommodate Metz's criticisms. However, using conceptual resources developed in debate concerning consequentialist theories of practical reason, I then demonstrate how we might progress in the debate between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories, and in theorizing on meaning in life more generally.

1. Introduction

In his comprehensive and impressive *Meaning in Life*, Thaddeus Metz argues that we should reject any theory of meaning in life with a consequentialist structure.¹ In this paper, I argue that Metz's arguments fail to establish his conclusion by drawing upon resources developed for consequentialist theories of morality.² While I am not sure whether some consequentialist theory of meaning in life is correct, or even the best available theory, I think such theories have more going for them than Metz's discussion suggests.

Even more important than the defense of consequentialist theories, however, is the broader lesson to be learned from this defense. As this paper demonstrates, the discussion on meaning in life has much to gain by drawing on the conceptual resources available in other domains of normative inquiry. By taking advantage of these resources, we will be able to make real progress in our theorizing on

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¹ Metz (2014), pp. 197-8.

² There are limits to the fruitfulness of any distinction between types of consequentialisms. As Campbell Brown aptly notes, "'consequentialism' is a term of art used by philosophers to mean different things on different occasions, none of which is most obviously deserving of the name" (2009), p. 751.

meaning in life.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I explain Metz's terminology. Then, in Section 3, I reconstruct Metz's arguments and demonstrate how someone who defends a consequentialist theory of meaning in life might respond. Finally, in Section 4, I explain how the failure of Metz's objections illustrates the larger point concerning progress in both the debate over consequentialist theories and the wider literature on meaning in life.

2. Preliminaries

On Metz's analysis, to talk of 'life's meaning' is to talk about some combination of the purposiveness, self-transcendence, and admirability of that life (and, perhaps, some further property a life might have as well).³ Metz cites the lives of Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Albert Einstein, Charles Darwin, Pablo Picasso, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky as exemplars of lives with meaning (i.e. meaningful lives) in the sense he is after.⁴

Thus, a theory of meaning in life is an attempt to explain what feature these lives have in common such that they are meaningful. A theory is 'consequentialist' when it posits that the unifying element of meaningful lives is that it produces good consequences. More particularly, per Metz, it is the view that "the more final goodness one produces, and the more badness one reduces, wherever and however one can in the long-term, the more meaningful one's life".⁵

At this point, I wish to stop and flag a concern. In his characterization of consequentialist theories, Metz builds in a number of assumptions that proponents of consequentialism need not accept and do not when it comes to moral consequentialism. These include the assumptions that neither the distribution of goods nor the means to them are themselves relevant to the final net goodness of the consequences.⁶ However, as Metz will later capitalize on these assumptions in his objections, and much of my defense will involve

³ Metz (2014), pp. 34-5.

⁴ Metz (2014), p. 2. Some of these lives are controversially meaningful. For our purposes, however, we can set aside whether these lives are actually meaningful. We can instead say that these lives *as popularly conceived* would be meaningful.

⁵ Metz (2014), p. 184.

⁶ Metz also assumes that relationship between consequences and meaning are aggregative such that any increase in meaning requires an increase in net final goodness and vice versa. Though this assumption is not so controversial, it is worth noting that some consequentialist might deny it.

denying them, it is important that we recognize them as we proceed.

Metz, or someone sympathetic, might stipulate that consequentialist theories of meaning in life are committed to these assumptions. Any theory which does not share them is simply not the sort of theory to which the label ‘consequentialist’ applies. This reply obscures the substantive issue at stake. The question is whether, and to what extent, the goodness of consequences explains why some lives are meaningful. Stipulating the use of the term ‘consequentialist’ in this manner still leaves open the possibility that consequences are all there is to meaning in life.

3. Three Arguments against Consequentialist Theories of Meaning in Life

Metz argues primarily against a utilitarian theory of meaning in life on which final goodness and badness are solely a function of what is good or bad for people. In this paper, I am not interested in defending any particular consequentialist theory of meaning in life such as those advanced by Peter Singer or Irving Singer.⁷ I set aside any particular arguments against them (and grant their conclusions) except where relevant to Metz’s broader objections to consequentialist theories. Rather, I am more interested in Metz’s general rejection of a theory “because of its consequentialist structure”.⁸

3.1: Meaning in Means

In his own words, Metz’s first criticism of consequentialist theories is that “bringing about final value *with any (permissible) mechanism whatsoever* does not exhaust the respect in which realizing it can confer meaning on life”.⁹ The reasoning is as follows:

1. The means by which goods are produced cannot increase net final goodness.
2. The means by which goods are produced can increase net final meaningfulness.
3. So, there is more to meaningfulness than net final goodness (i.e.

⁷ See Singer (1995) and Singer (1996).

⁸ Metz (2014), p. 12.

⁹ Metz (2014), p. 198.

consequentialism).

Metz's characterization of consequentialist theories implies the first premise. Metz justifies the second premise by appealing to two thought experiments. The first, originally created by Robert Nozick, calls us to imagine a machine which can bring about any result with the push of a button. The second calls us to compare two individuals, one who donates inherited wealth to charity to benefit some impoverished community, and the other who works to benefit that community. In both experiments, Metz judges that, "*ceteris paribus*, promoting goodness for its own sake in a robust, active, or intense way would confer more meaning".¹⁰ That is, using the machine or one's inherited wealth for some meaningful end – such as the benefit of an impoverished community – would be less meaningful than the alternative where achieves that end via robust, active, or intense work.

For the sake of argument, I accept Metz's judgement about both cases and that they establish his premise.¹¹ The central problem remains that Metz fails to motivate his characterization of what it means for a theory to be consequentialist. As such, a consequentialist might simply deny the first premise by allowing that robust, active, or intense means contribute to the final goodness of the consequence they produce. It is better – they might say – when someone works hard. Even if we wish to resist saying that hard work itself is a good, we might still say that the good results of hard work are made even better by that work than they would have otherwise been. To see how this might work, consider G. E. Moore's principle that "*The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts*".¹² In this way, hard work might enhance the value of an 'organic whole' (to use Moore's language) without being valuable itself.¹³

3.2: Meaning in Distribution

Metz's second objection to consequentialist theories of meaning in life is that "the instruction to promote as much objective value wherever one can is too

¹⁰ Metz (2014), p. 198.

¹¹ Ben Bramble argues that these cases contain confounding details which undermine them as counter-examples to consequentialist theories of meaning. See Bramble (2015), pp. 5-7.

¹² Moore (2015), §18.

¹³ Moore (2015), §20.

crude” and “there would often be most reason of meaning to realize it *in oneself*”.¹⁴ The reasoning here is:

1. The distribution of goods produced cannot increase net final goodness produced.
2. The distribution of goods produced can increase net final meaningfulness.
3. So, there is more to meaningfulness than net final goodness.

As before, the first premise follows from Metz’s characterization of consequentialist theories. To support the second premise, Metz offers a thought experiment concerning a wife and her husband. In it, the two (quite impressively) calculate that more total goods will be “produced in the long run if the wife stayed home and supported the husband in his professional career, more than if he instead took care of the household or if they both worked and shared the domestic labor”.¹⁵ However, Metz finds the consequentialist implication that the wife would thereby lead a more meaningful life in her domestic role counterintuitive. It matters for the meaningfulness of a life whether the goods produced are in that life or in some other person’s life.

In this case, I share Metz’s intuition but doubt that our shared judgment supports the second premise. The case contains details that, I suspect, confound my judgment and, perhaps, others’ judgments as well. The detail that most concerns me is the gender and relationship of the individuals in the case. As the case is constructed, optimal behavior comports to traditional patriarchal norms about the role of women in marriage. On these norms, wives are expected to make personal sacrifices to support their husbands. As a critic of such traditional patriarchal norms – a position I suspect I share with many other academics – I cannot be sure my judgment about the meaningfulness of the wife’s life is not being influenced by the appearance of these norms. When I modify the case to be about two teammates rather than a wife and her husband, I am less willing to say that teammate who sacrifices for the other thereby lives less meaningfully. This difference in judgment between the two cases indicates that in the married couple case, my judgment is tracking something irrelevant to the second premise. To be clear, I am not accusing Metz of subscribing to these patriarchal norms.

¹⁴ Metz (2014), p. 195.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Nor am I suggesting that his thought experiment supports such norms. I am merely suggesting that there is reason to doubt our intuitions support the second premise, especially the intuitions of those who strongly oppose traditional patriarchal norms.

Nevertheless, the truth of the second premise would not diminish the deeper problem. As with Metz's previous objection, it is again open to a consequentialist to deny the first premise. A consequentialist can allow that the net final goodness of a consequence depends in part on how the distribution of goods ends up. Examples from the literature include Larry Temkin, who holds that an equal distribution is better, Derek Parfit, who maintains the good of a distribution which prioritizes the least well-off, and Shelly Kagan and Fred Feldman, who have each claimed (in their own way) goods are better distributed according to desert.¹⁶

3.3: *Meaning in Attraction*

Metz's third objection is that "*bringing about* what is non-instrumentally desirable is not the only way to relate to it so as to accrue meaning in life".¹⁷ The problem for the consequentialist is that "although subjective attraction is not *necessary* for a condition to be *pro tanto* meaningful, it would *increase* its meaning".¹⁸ Metz reasons:

1. Someone's attitude towards their life cannot increase that life's net final goodness.
2. Someone's attitude towards their life can increase that life's net final meaningfulness.
3. So, there is more to meaningfulness than net final goodness.

The first premise follows from Metz's understanding of what consequentialism *is* such that "According to the standard form of consequentialism, exhibiting a propositional attitude [...] can have only instrumental value".¹⁹ He supports the second premise with another series of

¹⁶ See Temkin (1993), Parfit (1997), Feldman (2004), and Kagan (2012).

¹⁷ Metz (2014), p. 198.

¹⁸ Metz (2014), p. 196.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

thought experiments. We can imagine “a Mother Teresa who helps others enormously but is alienated from her work”.²⁰ Metz thinks that, in such a case, Mother Teresa’s life would be *more* meaningful were she not so alienated. Since, as I take it, her alienation is a function of her propositional attitudes towards her work, the second premise follows.

Metz considers a consequentialist objection to the second premise. A consequentialist might assert that Mother Teresa’s life would be better for her absent alienation and life going better for someone does not necessarily make their life more meaningful. Thus, we can explain why Mother Teresa’s life would be preferable absent alienation without thinking it would be more meaningful and, thereby, committing ourselves to the second premise. Metz denies that her life going better completely explains what’s preferable about Mother Teresa’s life absent alienation. As he puts it “It is not a matter of *welfare* to exhibit attitudes such as identifying closely with a project, or concentrating intently on it, or setting an end and realizing it. And even if it were, I submit that these subjective conditions have an additional, non-welfarist property that is the factor conferring meaning on the agent’s life”.²¹ For the sake of argument, I once more accept Metz’s judgment about this case and his response to this objection.

But again, the consequentialist can deny the first premise. The world is an even better place when people appreciate the work they do to improve it. There are a number of plausible explanations for why this might be so. For example, failure to appreciate the worth of one’s actions might consist in a form of ignorance. If it is better that we have true beliefs about the world then it would be better to appreciate the worth of our actions.²² Alternatively (or additionally), failure to appreciate the worth of one’s actions might consist in a failure to pursue things for the right reasons. If it is better that we do so, then appreciating the worth of our actions is again better.

4. Progress

Metz’s objections to consequentialist theories of meaning in life systematically underestimate the flexibility of the consequentialist approach.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Metz (2014), p. 197.

²² See Lynch (2004) for the view that it is better we have true beliefs.

Consequentialist theories are compatible with a wide range of results about cases. Aaron Smuts provides an illustrative example. On his good cause account, “One’s life is meaningful to the extent that it promotes the good”.²³ What promotes the good? Smuts mentions an open-ended list of, “various kinds of goods that matter, such as achievement, moral worth, perfectionist value, and aesthetic value”.²⁴ Such a list provides Smuts the resources to respond to counter-example by insisting that there is some “value to be found”.²⁵

Though Smuts does not discuss the extent of this flexibility, this feature of consequentialism has been the subject of some discussion among those interested in consequentialist moral theories.²⁶ For example, consider what has been sometimes called ‘consequentializing.’ As Douglas Portmore explains “we consequentialize a nonconsequentialist theory by constructing a substantive version of consequentialism that yields, in every possible world, the same set of deontic verdicts that [the nonconsequentialist theory] yields”.²⁷ With regard to morality, this can be accomplished as follows: “Take the very feature that the nonconsequentialist says determined which act should be performed [...] and claim that this feature determines which outcome the agent should prefer”.²⁸ While the method needs to be expanded to capture other moral concepts like permissibility, agent-relative restrictions (e.g. rights), supererogation, and moral dilemmas, Portmore, at least, is confident that “for any remotely plausible nonconsequentialist theory, we can construct a version of consequentialism that is deontically equivalent to it”.²⁹

Such a method works just as well for consequentialist theories of meaning in life. A consequentialist can take the feature the nonconsequentialist says determines the meaningfulness of a life and claim that this feature determines which outcomes we should admire, regard as purposive, or self-transcendent. In fact, the method is much more straightforward for these theories as there are no equivalents to moral permissibility, dilemma, and supererogation within the evaluation of meaning in life.

The underappreciated upshot of this method is that the general debates

²³ Smuts (2013), p. 1.

²⁴ Smuts (2013), p. 14.

²⁵ Smuts (2013), p. 17.

²⁶ See Vallentyne (1988), Oddie and Milne (1991), Dreier (1993), Louise (2004), Portmore (2009), Smith (2009), Brown (2011), and Hurley (2013).

²⁷ Portmore (2009), p. 330.

²⁸ Portmore (2009), p. 329.

²⁹ Portmore (2009), p. 336.

between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories of meaning in life can only make minimal progress with the use of thought experiments to produce counter-examples. While particular consequentialist theories remain susceptible to such counter-examples, there will always be some consequentialist theory that avoids the counter-example and thereby remains extensionally adequate.³⁰

How, then, are we to progress the debate between consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories of meaning in life? We will need to develop criteria for what a good explanation of meaning in life will look like, apart from extensional adequacy. I recommend we look to normative theory for assistance.

Consider Elizabeth Anderson's reply to commentary from Nicholas Sturgeon where similar issues are raised regarding consequentialism about reasons for action (which Anderson calls 'C').³¹ Anderson writes:

My objection to C is not that it gives us the wrong ends. Sturgeon is right to suppose that with enough ingenuity in defining the structure of valuable states of affairs and in postulating causal connections, C can end up recommending almost any aim and thereby mimic the causal consequences of any other theory. My objection to C is rather that it fails to articulate an adequate rationale for the ends it recommends. It turns into a brute evaluative fact what begs for an explanation.³²

Here we see Anderson criticizing a consequentialist theory of reasons for action (i.e. theory of practical reason) on the grounds that it fails to explain *why* the moral ends are as they are. This is because a consequentialist understanding of which ends are valuable subordinates the value of people to the value of states of affairs (or possible worlds). Why? It is simply a brute fact that some states of affairs are more valuable than others. Anderson favors an alternative view on which everything derives its value from the value of people. Specifically, something is valuable just in case people can, on intersubjective reflection, have the evaluative attitudes they do towards the things they value for the reasons they value those things.³³

³⁰ Brown argues, convincingly to my mind, that this is not true for moral theories on one plausible and common understanding of 'consequentialism.' See Brown (2009).

³¹ Paul Hurley connects this debate with the debate over consequentialist theories of morality. See Hurley (2013).

³² Anderson (1996), pp. 541-42.

³³ Anderson (1996), p. 540.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate Anderson's complaint and whether her alternative ultimately succeeds. Rather, I use her discussion to demonstrate *how* we might criticize consequentialist theories of meaning in life (and to indicate how they might respond in turn) such that progress can be made. Her remarks suggest a criterion of adequacy for any theory of practical reason: an adequate theory will be able to explain why something is more valuable than another without brute appeal. We might adopt a similar criterion of adequacy for theories of meaning in life and see whether consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories fare. Alternatively, we might judge that there is something about meaning that differentiates it from practical reason in general such that different explanatory burdens obtain for their respective theories.

To develop this latter point, a theorist about meaning in life might take themselves to only be discussing a certain class of practical reasons – reasons of meaning in life – and this class is, at least partially, distinct from other classes of practical reason (e.g. moral reasons, prudential reasons, etc.). These classes have different features (e.g. moral reasons relate to deontic requirements like rightness and wrongness) such that explaining why certain reasons belong to the class they do will require different criteria. Either way, our discussion of meaning in life will be all the richer for considering these issues.

All of this is to demonstrate what I take to be the ultimate lesson of this paper. We should seek to understand the structural similarities between our idea of meaning in life and other normative concepts, like morality. Insofar as they are similar, we should draw upon the conceptual resources to be found in the wide literature on those subjects to inform our discussion of meaning in life. This paper itself exemplifies the fruitfulness of this method.

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Defending the Purpose Theory of Meaning in Life

Jason Poettcker*

Abstract

In *Meaning in Life* (2013, Oxford University Press), Thaddeus Metz presents a robust and innovative naturalistic account of what makes an individual's life objectively meaningful. Metz discusses six existing arguments for purpose theory of meaning in life and offers objections to each of these arguments. Purpose theory is "the view that one's life is meaningful just insofar as one fulfills a purpose that God has assigned to one" (Metz, 2013a, p. 80). Metz also proposes a novel argument to undermine purpose theory by showing that it is inconsistent with the best argument for a God-centered theory of meaning. He argues that an infinite, immutable, simple, atemporal being could not be purposive or active. I aim to defend purpose theory against Metz's arguments and objections by arguing that Metz's novel argument against purpose theory fails. I argue that God need not have all these properties and that having these properties does not entail that God cannot be purposive or active. I also provide a new argument for purpose theory that addresses the concerns and inconsistencies that Metz finds with current versions of purpose theory. I conclude that purpose theory is not undermined.

1. Setting the stage

'Why is life made only for an end?
Why do I do all this waiting then?
Why this frightened part of me that's fated to pretend?
Why is life made only for an end?

Why in the night sky are the lights on?
Why is the earth moving round the sun?
Floating in the vacuum with no purpose, not a one
Why in the night sky are the lights on?'

"Blue Spotted Tail" (2011) Robin Peckinhold of the Fleet Foxes

Perhaps due to the enormous influence of Nietzsche (1886), Schopenhauer

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(1900), Heidegger (1927), Camus (1942), Sartre (1946), and Russell (1903, 1957) and the rejection of the existence of a supernatural or divine creator, the question of life's meaning was either avoided or considered to have no positive answer by many analytic philosophers during the twentieth century.¹ Recently, interest in the question has re-emerged among contemporary philosophers such as John Cottingham (2003, 2005, 2008),² W.L. Craig (1994),³ and Joshua Seachris (2010, 2013),⁴ who each defend various supernaturalist views of meaning in life. They argue that the existence of God (or God and immortality) is necessary for a person's life to be objectively meaningful. In response to these supernaturalist views, philosophers such as Erik Wielenberg (2005), Susan Wolf (2010), and Thaddeus Metz (2013a) argue that a person's life can be meaningful insofar as one pursues subjective or objective goods found in the physical world. They take an "optimistic naturalist view"; namely, that even if there are no supernatural entities and human life as a whole has no objective meaning because it is the product of the blind forces of nature, *individual* lives can still be objectively meaningful.⁵ Thus, God is not necessary for meaning in life. Metz has recently emerged as a front-runner in this debate with a book-length argument for a naturalist theory of meaning in life. In *Meaning in Life* (2013), Metz presents a robust and innovative naturalistic account of what makes an individual's life objectively meaningful. First he surveys all of the naturalist and

¹ Susan Wolf (2010b) explains that the question "What is the meaning of life?" has been avoided because it has already been answered and the answer is depressing, or it is considered to necessarily depend on the existence of God and is thus "not in the purview of secular philosophers" (Cited in Seachris (2013a: 305). Joshua Seachris also notes that analytic philosophers have been mostly silent about the question either because they doubted it had an answer or they were suspicious that the question was "incoherent and meaningless" (2013a) p. 2.

² John Cottingham argues that God is necessary for meaning in life because he is the only basis for objective morality. He writes: "The religious perspective – or at least a certain kind of religious perspective (more of this later) – offer the possibility of meaningfulness by providing a powerful normative framework or focus for the life of virtue. ... To act in light of such an attitude is to act in the faith that our struggles mean something beyond the local expression of a contingently evolving genetic lottery; that despite the cruelty and misery in the world, the struggle for goodness will always enjoy a certain kind of buoyancy" (2003), pp. 72-71.

³ Craig (1994) writes: "Without God, there can be no objective meaning in life. ... For the universe does not really acquire meaning just because I happen to give it one." (Cited in Seachris (2013a, p.164).

⁴ Joshua Seachris argues that the meaning of life is a "narrative that which provides the deepest existentially relevant explanatory narrative framework through which to answer this existentially relevant cluster of questions. This narrative framework is what ultimately tracks what is being requested in asking, "What is the meaning of life?" ... If the theistic God does not exist, then my intuitions are with them, and life is not a dramatic narrative," [thus life would not be objectively meaningful] (2010), p. 110, p. 299.

⁵ Seachris, (2013a), p. 10.

and supernaturalist theories and finds them wanting. Then he presents his own novel “fundamentality theory” which, he argues, “accounts for the meaningfulness of the good, true and beautiful, and avoids the objections to other theories while incorporating their kernels of truth.”⁶ Metz’s summarizes his theory as follows: “A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality toward fundamental conditions of human existence.”⁷ In other words, one can increase the meaningfulness of one’s life by rationally choosing to pursue goals that positively affect human individuals, groups, and their environment. These goals include “moral achievement, intellectual reflection, and aesthetic creation.”⁸ I am responding to his novel arguments against one supernaturalist theory of meaning called purpose theory.

2. Metz’s new argument against purpose theory

Metz defines purpose theory as “the view that one’s life is meaningful just insofar as one fulfills a purpose that God has assigned to one”⁹ A purpose theorist holds that God must both exist and provide us with a purpose that we must fulfill in order for there to be objective meaning in life. This is one kind of supernaturalist theory of meaning of life. Metz presents a new argument against purpose theory which aims to show that the most compelling motivation for God-centered theories is in tension with purpose theory. First, he builds his case for why we should think that his formulation of God-centered theory is the best standard for appraising purpose theory. Then he argues that God having the properties simplicity, immutability, atemporality, and infinitude constitutes the best reason for thinking that God alone could make our lives meaningful. Finally, he argues that if God has these properties it would be impossible for him to provide us with a purpose. I will explain Metz’s new argument and then argue that his novel argument is not successful in defeating purpose theory. I will also provide a new argument for purpose theory that addresses the concerns and inconsistencies that Metz finds with current versions of purpose theory.

Metz first explains that his argument against purpose theory rests on

⁶ Metz, (2013a), p.13.

⁷ Ibid., p. 409.

⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

accepting that the God-centered theory he presents is the most promising. If one is not convinced that this theory is the most promising, the rest of the argument loses its force. He explains that God-centered theory “maintains not just that the better one’s relationship with God, the more meaningful one’s life, but also that the existence of God is necessary for one’s life to be *at all* meaningful (or at least meaningful on balance).”¹⁰ Metz gives three main reasons for thinking that God-centered theory (as he construes it) is the right standard for judging purpose theory. First, the most historically prominent views of meaning in life in the Western religious traditions are “clear instances of God-centered theory.”¹¹ Second, the God-centered view coheres with religious theories of value and goodness. Meaning is closely connected with the notion of value and most religious thinkers agree that God is necessary for objective morality, human excellence, and wellbeing. Thus, a religious theory of meaning should also hold that God is necessary for a meaningful life.¹² Third, in order to make a real distinction between naturalist and supernaturalist theories of meaning, one must argue that God’s existence and a certain relationship with him is necessary for meaning rather than merely sufficient. A naturalist might agree that if God existed he would add the meaning of our lives, but she would deny that God is necessary for a life to be meaningful (p. 108). So for reasons of “tradition, coherence, and relevance” we should think that his version of God-centered theory is the correct standard for assessing purpose theory; a specific instance of God-centered theories.

I will state Metz’s argument and explain how he supports each premise. Metz’s argument, stated formally:

(1) The best argument for a God-centered theory includes the claim that God has certain properties such as simplicity, immutability, atemporality, infinitude/unlimitedness.

(2) These properties (simplicity, immutability, atemporality, infinitude) are incompatible with a purposive God.

So, (3) Purpose theory probably cannot be the correct version of God-centered theory.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 107.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 108.

2a. Metz's support for premise (1)

First, as motivation for premise (1) he argues that the six common arguments for purpose theory already in the literature fail because “*nature*, independently of God, could perform the function of which God alone has been thought capable.”¹³ The six arguments for purpose theory (very roughly sketched) claim that fulfilling God’s purposes is necessary and sufficient for meaning in life for the following reasons. First, only God can provide a reward for right choices in the afterlife. Second, only God could prevent our lives from being accidental. Third, only God could create an objective ethic, which constitutes his purpose. Fourth, only God could make our lives part of a grand scheme that encompasses the universe. Fifth, only God’s eternal love can ground a meaningful life. Sixth, only an infinite God can stop an infinite regress of finite meaningful conditions.¹⁴ In response to each of these arguments, Metz argues that nature *could* provide rewards, prevent contingency, provide objective moral standards, allow us to be part a grand plan, make loving relationships possible, and give us intrinsic meaning.¹⁵ So Metz has boxed the purpose theorist into a corner with only two ways out, reject purpose theory or accept his version of God-centered theory. Herein lies the motivation and force of premise (1); if nature can do all of these things, we must come up with a better reason to accept that God is necessary for meaning in life and this means looking for “something *utterly* supernatural, viz., something that nature simply could not (or cannot even be conceived to) exhibit.”¹⁶ So, what are these unique properties that Metz proposes?

Metz notes that a theist may want propose that God being all-good, all-powerful, or all-knowing would be sufficient for meaning in life. He thinks these properties are not sufficient because we find them to a lesser degree in the natural world. For God to be both necessary and sufficient for meaning his essence must be *completely unique* from anything in nature and have “the kind of final value towards which it would be worthwhile contouring one’s life.”¹⁷ So, he draws from the perfect being theology of Katherin Rogers (2000) to argue that the qualitative properties that meet these conditions are atemporality,

¹³ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁷ Ibid.

immutability, simplicity, and infinitude/unlimitedness.¹⁸ He argues that these properties are distinct from nature, and that they could be thought to display final and superlative value.

First, to show how these properties are distinct from nature, he argues that human beings, angels and the natural world clearly could not display these properties because they are spatiotemporal, changeable, decomposable, and limited.¹⁹ If God displayed simplicity, which is a “condition of being unable even to be conceived as being composed of separate parts”, he would also be atemporal and immutable because, “a being without parts obviously cannot change, while a being in time implies that it has extension, viz., stretches over moments, and hence has parts.”²⁰ So, simplicity is a good candidate for being distinct and it implies two other unique qualitative properties, atemporality and immutability. He does not explain how simplicity might also imply unlimitedness, but I will assume that he thinks God’s unlimitedness somehow displays his distinctness from nature.

Next, he shows how the four properties display important sorts of final value. God’s simplicity would display final value when combined with the independent good of personhood. All four properties exhibit the values of unity and independence. First, independence is displayed by a perfectly simple being who does not depend on any parts for its existence and is thus completely self-sufficient (it does not need anything other than itself).²¹ A being free from the limits of space and time would not be subject to death or decay, nor would it be subject to a perspective restricted by space and time. An immutable being would also be completely self-determining and thus free from other influences except itself.²² An infinite being is “unlimited and all encompassing” and thus,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ It is strange for Metz to include angels in this list as they are often supposed to be pure spirit and thus non-spatiotemporal and not made of parts.

²⁰ The doctrine of divine simplicity has nothing to do with conceivability. Rather it is just the claim that God has no parts or distinct attributes. Ibid., p. 111

²¹ Metz, (2013a), p.111. Metz seems to be arguing that the doctrine of *divine aseity* is derived from God being free from dependence on parts (simplicity). But Katherine Rogers argues that it is the other way around. She writes: “For the medievals the doctrine of divine simplicity followed inevitably from the aseity of God and the incorruptibility of God. God exists a se, absolutely independently of all that is not Himself. In fact, whatever is not God is created by Him. It is certainly correct to characterize Him as wise, powerful, good, etc., but if wisdom, power, goodness and the rest are necessary to God’s nature, but not identical to it, then God depends for his existence on other things. But that is impossible. Therefore God does not possess these qualities. He simply is omniscience etc. For God essence and existence are the same” (1996) p. 167).

²² Ibid.

“free of any restrictions” (Metz borrows this notion from Nozick).²³ A being with these four properties perfectly displays the value of independence.

Second, a being with these properties would also display the final value of unity. A simple being is completely unified “in that it cannot even be conceived to dissolve.”²⁴ In reference to the other properties he writes, “A being beyond space and time would lack extension or the “feebleness of division (Plotinus).”²⁵ An immutable being cannot help but remain what it is. Lastly, “an unlimited being would be utterly whole.”²⁶ Metz points out that other theists such as Plotinus, Anselm, and Aquinas have argued that the values of unity and independence are constituted by the qualitative properties.²⁷ Metz is implicitly arguing that these values are what allow God to “confer significance on our existence when we orient ourselves towards it [his value].”²⁸ This provides us with the best reason for accepting a God-centered theory, given that the other six common arguments fail to show that God is necessary for meaning. The next step Metz takes is to show how these properties conflict with purpose theory in order to convince us of premise (2).

2b. Metz’s support for premise (2)

Recall that premise (2) is “the claim that God’s having such qualitative properties is incompatible with the central tenets of purpose theory.”²⁹ The first concern is that a being who does not exist in time and cannot change would not be able to adopt a plan for the following reasons. Adopting an end requires deliberation; deliberations are temporal events involving alteration. Even adopting an end without prior deliberation takes time and forms something new in God.³⁰ Further, the act of God creating the world according to a plan also requires temporal succession.³¹ In other words, creation is an activity that implies there was a moment in time T_1 when there is nothing and a later moment in time T_2 when something that previously did not exist, now exists. Thus,

²³ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., footnote 9, p. 111

²⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

³¹ Ibid.

creation requires time and change or alteration from non-being to being. Also, if purpose theorists think that God responds to our free decision of whether to fulfill his purpose or not, this response must occur in time. All of these activities are events, and events require change and take place in time, thus God could not be atemporal *and* capable of forming, adopting, acting, or responding to a purpose.³² Metz concludes that an atemporal being could not form intentions or engage in any activities at all (if we assume that all activities require time). Thus, an atemporal God could not be purposive.

Next, he explains the problem of a simple being having more than one purpose. He argues that we must assume that God would have a different purpose for humans and for animals in order to avoid the “counterintuitive implication that animal lives can be as meaningful as human lives.”³³ Even if God had one grand purpose that allowed human and animal purposes to be a part of the grand purpose, this would still conflict with simplicity because the plan would have parts. Although Metz does not spell this out here, he seems to be assuming that if God’s plan has parts, then God would also have to be composed of parts. In the same way, if God engaged in more than one activity then he would not be simple. Even if one tried to argue that God’s creation was a single grand act, Metz argues, “it is difficult to see how a single grand act ground purpose theory’s conception of what God does.”³⁴ It is unclear exactly why Metz thinks it is difficult to see this. It could be because he thinks that purpose theory requires God to form more than one intention or it could be that a single act does not seem adequate to provide a specific purpose for human beings.

Finally, drawing from Robert Nozick, Metz argues that the property of infinitude implies being unlimited. A being that has a purpose would be limited in virtue of being defined by *that* purpose and not another purpose. To reformulate this problem, a being that is defined by *anything* or *any way of being*, (having a purpose) would be limited by that way of being. He seems to be arguing that an unlimited being would have to encompass *every way of being*, or have all possible purposes at once. This shows us that if God is unlimited then, as Nozick argues, “no human terms can truly apply to it (God)” because to describe God in one way would imply that he was limited by that property.³⁵ If

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

this is true then an unlimited purposive agent is self-contradictory. Metz concludes that a God who is simple, atemporal, immutable, and infinite could not be purposive, and thus could not assign us a purpose that gave us meaning in life and... “Shazaam!” the central tenet of purpose theory is defeated.

3. Objections to premise (1)

In response to Metz’s argument against purpose theory I will begin with premise (1). He proposes that simplicity is only valuable when “conjoined with the independent good of personhood.”³⁶ Later in his explanation of premise (2), he sums up the unique features of God as “simple or infinite personhood.”³⁷ First of all, one could argue that the properties would have no value at all if it were not for the personhood of God. Metz admits that one could imagine a perfectly simple impersonal sub-atomic particle (Higgs Boson?) but we would not want to say that a particle has sufficient value to provide meaning in life just because it is simple. I point this out because I see two main problems with introducing personhood as the independent good that makes the other properties valuable.

First, it is unclear whether personhood should be understood as *just* an independent good or as a property that *displays a good*. If personhood were a property then it would not really be unique to God since human persons share the property of personhood and Metz would not employ a property found in the natural world for his argument.³⁸ Second, if it is only an independent good that gives the others their value, then it is unclear why God would need the other properties to prove his final value. Metz argues that we need the other qualities combined with personhood in order for God to be completely unique from nature. This is a strange move that presents a problem for the whole argument. If we know anything about personhood, it is probably from our own experience as persons. Typically we understand persons as rational agents capable of: determining their own ends, of exercising rights, awareness, intentional action and thinking (acting for a purpose or goal, thinking about something rather than mere sensation). We also assume that persons are beings distinct from *impersonal* entities or things and forces such as animals, rocks, trees, and gravity.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

Theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, William Hasker, William Lane Craig, and Christine M. Korsgaard all regard persons as capable of at least some kind of activity.³⁹ Kant bases human value on personality which he defines as “freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature.”⁴⁰ Kant goes on to argue that human and divine personality have this same kind of freedom.⁴¹ For Kant, personality is fundamentally the capacity for free action and thought. Korsgaard agrees with Kant that what defines a person is their capacity for acting morally and rationally.⁴² If one accepts this conception of personhood, then by definition, a God who is personal would be capable of activity and change, thus undermining Metz’s argument for premise (2): Forming purposes take time and require the capacity to change both of which an atemporal and immutable God could not do. Presumably, Metz would not include this notion of personhood in his argument because it would undermine his argument, so we must assume that he is supposing some notion of personhood that does not imply the capacity for action, change or having purposes. Thus, for his argument for premise (1) to be non-contradictory, Metz needs to provide a plausible account of personhood that does not include being capable of action or change.

Further, Metz is too quick to assume that omniscience, omni-benevolence,

³⁹ There is also a large body of literature on human personhood and divine personhood that I will not address here. For clear and insightful work on human personhood see Christine Korsgaard’s piece on the origin of our legal concept of persons, “Personhood, Animals, and the Law”, (2013). She writes, “In ethics, a person is an object of respect, to be valued for her own sake, and never to be used as a mere means to an end, while a thing has only a derivative value, and may be used as a means to some person’s ends.” (p. 25).

For work on Divine Personhood see Wolfhart Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology, 3 vols., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (1991–98). He argues that personhood is defined by activity. Theodore James Whapham writes about Pannenberg’s view, “Thus, at the very center of Pannenberg’s definition of divine personhood is the notion that the persons are distinct centers of activity. In this way they can be identified with the modern notion of subjects. This idea of three distinct centers of divine activity flows naturally from the idea that the Trinitarian persons receive their divinity from one another.” (2010: 376).

Also see William Hasker’s recent work *Metaphysics and the Tri-personal God* (2013). He explains the complex and long debate in theology and philosophy about the Trinity and divine personhood. He defends the view that “each of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a *person*, a “distinct center of knowledge, will, love, and action.”” (abstract for Chapter 24).

See also Craig’s paper “Divine Timelessness and Personhood.” (1998) pp. 109-124.

⁴⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:87, p. 74.

⁴¹ Kant writes “We rightly attribute this condition even to the divine will with respect to the rational beings in the world as its creatures, inasmuch as it rests on their personality, by which alone they are ends in themselves.” (1997), 5:87, p. 74.

⁴² “To hold some one responsible is to regard her as a person—that is to say, as a free and equal person capable of acting both rationally and morally” Christine M. Korsgaard, (1992), p. 306.

and omnipotence could not be properties that make God qualitatively different and more valuable than nature, just because we find them to a lesser degree in the natural world (p. 110). Most theists argue that God has goodness, knowledge and power essentially, so nature would need to have these qualities essentially, not accidentally. But of course nature is not essentially good, powerful or knowing, neither does anything in nature have these properties essentially. If nature is not necessarily or essentially good, powerful, and knowing, then one could imagine a purely physical world that did not have these qualities. Even if we could find instances of goodness, knowledge and power in nature, this would not mean that nature is sufficient for meaning if meaning in life requires having these qualities *essentially*. So, possessing omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence essentially could be properties that are necessary for ground meaning in life.

4. My objections to premise (2)

4a. Atemporality vs. purpose

In response to Metz's argument, the purpose theorist could accept that Metz has indeed pointed how God's being an immutable, atemporal, simple, and infinite would make God completely distinct from nature and have final value, but try to undermine premise (2) by arguing that these properties do not conflict with a purposive God. I will offer some good reasons to think that the properties Metz considers do not conflict with the notion of a purposive God. First, in response to Metz's first argument about the conflict between atemporality and purposiveness, one could argue that God could have a plan that exists eternally within his mind and thus God never *adopts* a plan because he always has it, thus avoiding the claim that God's deliberation involves change. There is also a large body of literature on God's relation to time that Metz utterly fails to engage. In this literature, there are numerous accounts of how an atemporal God could relate to a temporal world. So for Metz's objection to succeed, he would need to show that these explanations are implausible, which he does not do. Further, Metz's view of God as atemporal not only bars God from forming intentions, but also implies that God could not create the world or engage in any activity at

all.⁴³ Thus, his view of God contradicts most, if not all, theistic notions of God's atemporality. There are many theists who think that God is atemporal and still think that God can create. One could turn to Augustine for a suggestion about how an atemporal God could create. He writes in his *Confessions*, an answer to those who ask,

How did it occur to God to create something, when he had never created something before? ...Grant them, O Lord, to think well what they say and to recognize that 'never' has no meaning when there is no time. ...Let them see, then that there cannot possibly be time without creation. ...Let them understand that before all time began you are the eternal Creator of all time, and that no time and no created thing is co-eternal with you⁴⁴

If God created time then it would not make sense to say that God's decision to create took time. Metz assumes that time would have to exist before God created and that creation implies temporality, but these assumptions are not adequately supported. One could also turn to Aquinas who argues that God created time along with the heavens and the earth.⁴⁵ Anselm (who also views God as atemporal) presents a view of God's creation as God expressing his eternal thought.⁴⁶ For a modern formulation of how it is possible for an atemporal God to create we can look to Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (1992, 1985)⁴⁷ and Brian Leftow (1991).⁴⁸ Stump and Kretzmann argue that God is one timeless act identical to his will, which has multiple effects.⁴⁹ In order for Metz to provide adequate support for this apparent inconsistency between God being atemporal and purposive he would need to engage with this literature and give good arguments for why they fail to show that God can be atemporal and

⁴³ Metz writes "How could a person who is beyond time, create a spatio-temporal world, when doing so, would appear to require time?" (2013a), p. 115.

⁴⁴ St. Augustine, (1961), Book XI Chapter 30, p. 279.

⁴⁵ Aquinas writes in *The Summa Theologica*, "Things are said to be created in the beginning of time, not as if the beginning of time were a measure of creation, but because together with time the heavens and earth were created" (1948) Q. 46 Article 3. p. 258.

⁴⁶ Anselm writes in *Monologium* "Hence, although it is clear that the beings that were created were nothing before their creation, ...yet they were not nothing so far as the creator's thought is concerned, through which, and according to which, they were created" (1962), Chapter IX.

⁴⁷ Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, "Eternity, Awareness, and Action," (1992), pp. 477-8.

⁴⁸ Brian Leftow, "Eternity and Simultaneity," (1991), pp. 148-79.

⁴⁹ See note 56 for more details of their argument. Also see Barry Miller's (1996) account of divine causation for a better explanation of how a simple God can create.

purposive. To be fair, Metz does acknowledge that these responses are out there, but he does not engage with them.⁵⁰

4b. Are atemporality and immutability necessary?

A purpose theorist could also accept that God is simple and infinite while denying that God is essentially atemporal and immutable. Metz has not done enough work to show that theists must believe that God is atemporal or immutable. In his argument he assumes that time exists absolutely before God creates the world. William Lane Craig argues that if God is the creator of the temporal world then he is temporal.⁵¹ The upshot of his argument is that before God created the world He was timeless and then “undergoes an extrinsic change at the moment of creation which draws Him into time in virtue of His real relation to the world.”⁵² Taking this view would allow one to reject Metz’s argument that “since the universe is spatio-temporal, God must be an atemporal being to have been its creator.”⁵³ Craig’s view allows for God to undergo extrinsic change from atemporality to temporality while avoiding intrinsic or essential change in his nature. Nicholas Wolterstorff also proposes a view of God as everlasting rather than atemporal which allows God to create and act in time.⁵⁴ Metz at least needs engage with arguments like this to show that God must be and remain atemporal to create a spatio-temporal world. Metz might respond by arguing that if God were atemporal and ‘subsequently’ became temporal then he could not be immutable. In response, one would either need to accept that God is not immutable or give some explanation (as Craig does above) about how it is possible for God to undergo extrinsic change without undergoing intrinsic change.

⁵⁰ Metz, (2013a), p. 115.

⁵¹ Craig writes, “The argument can be summarized as follows:

22. God is creatively active in the temporal world.

23. If God is creatively active in the temporal world, God is really related to the temporal world.

24. If God is really related to the temporal world, God is temporal.

25. Therefore, God is temporal.

This argument, if successful, does not prove that God is essentially temporal, but that if He is a Creator of a temporal world—as He in fact is—, then He is temporal.” (2009), p. 160.

⁵² Craig, (2009), pp. 145-66.

⁵³ Metz, (2013a), p. 115.

⁵⁴ “It is not because he is outside of time – eternal, immutable, impassive – that we are to worship and obey God. It is because of what he can and does bring about within time that we mortals are to render him praise and obedience” Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting” (1975), p. 98.

4c. Simplicity vs. purpose

In response to the Metz's charge that purpose theory is not cohesive with simplicity, consider an analogy. Just as an architect designing a school could have the single purpose of increasing learning while assigning people various roles in contributing to that purpose, so God could have one purpose of glorifying himself and give animals and humans distinct ways of accomplishing that purpose. Metz objects to this answer because even if "human and animal purposes were components of a single plan for the universe, the fact of their being components would seem to imply a lack of simplicity. The same goes for different acts mentioned above."⁵⁵ At issue here is whether God would have to be composed of parts in order to perform more than one act, or provide a multifaceted plan. Metz thinks that a being with a single plan that has components could not be simple.

I respond to this worry by comparing Gods purpose or actions with single human acts that have many effects. A single spoken phrase, handshake, or signing of one's signature in the right context can have multiple effects, such as the starting of a war, the beginning of a long period of peace, the formation of a lifelong friendship.⁵⁶ Metz does not do enough to show that theists must accept that simplicity implies that God's plan could not have parts, or that God could not perform more than one act. Metz does admit that the purpose theorist could appeal to Aquinas by arguing that, "willing and knowing are not really distinct in God, and that having a purpose is part of the concept of willing."⁵⁷

Instead of engaging with these long-standing debates, Metz responds to Jacob Affolter's argument that God could assign various specific purposes without having multiple purposes in himself.⁵⁸ I think Metz needs to engage

⁵⁵ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

⁵⁶ Stump and Kretzmann have a similar analogy in their paper "Absolute Simplicity" (1985) they write, "Everyone recognizes analogous characterizations of ordinary human actions: the man who flips the switch on the wall may be correctly described as doing just one thing or he may, equally correctly, be said to do many things in doing that one thing (turning on the light, waking the dog, frightening the prowler, etc.) – a case of one action with many correct descriptions or many consequences of one action in the strict sense and many actions in a broader sense." they go on to argue that, "there is no special difficulty in understanding goodness to be manifested differently to different persons on different occasions [...] in ways that must be counted among the extrinsic accidental properties of the goodness manifested" p. 356.

⁵⁷ Metz, (2013a), p. 115.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 117.

directly with the literature on divine simplicity in order to sufficiently motivate the claim that God's simplicity prevents him from being purposive.⁵⁹ Metz might accept that there are good answers to his objections, but he would still argue that it is difficult to see how a single act could ground purpose theory's conception of what God does."⁶⁰ So the problem might still be that purpose theory requires that God perform more than a single act in order to have a purpose, create the world, reveal his purpose to human beings and then respond to our attempts to fulfill that purpose. But, this would only be a problem if God's single act could not have multiple, complex, and powerful effects that could ground meaning in life. A minor engagement with Kretzmann and Stump gives us a potentially viable option for how God's single act of will could be his willing "both goodness and the manifestation of goodness" manifested in different ways by him creating the world, revealing his purpose to human beings, and responding to our attempts to fulfill that purpose.⁶¹ Surely an all-powerful God manifesting his goodness in different ways would be sufficient to ground purpose theory. Thus, the claim that simplicity precludes the possibility of a plan or action having components or multiple effects is not sufficiently motivated. One could also simply reject simplicity as a property that God must have and thus avoid any apparent inconsistency between simplicity and purposiveness.

4d. Infinitude vs. purpose

Third, in response to the notion that infinitude implies being unlimited which conflicts with the notion of having one purpose, we need to clarify Metz's notion of being unlimited. Metz seems to imply that a being that is defined by *anything* or *any way of being*, (having one purpose) would be limited by that way of being. So he seems to be saying that an unlimited being would have to encompass *every way of being*, or have all possible purposes at once. If Metz thinks that God should have unlimited purposes, this implies that at least some of his purposes would conflict. However, (as other theologians have argued) God's omnipotence does not imply that God could do what is logically impossible.⁶²

⁵⁹ Metz mentions Katherin Rogers (1996), Kretzmann and Stump (1985), and Lodzinski (1998) as further reading on how to develop this line of thought.

⁶⁰ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

⁶¹ Kretzmann and Stump, (1985) p. 356.

⁶² Metz, (2000), cited in Seachris, (2013a), p. 208.

If God had conflicting purposes he would be internally inconsistent and contradictory, so a God having all possible purposes is inconceivable. God's unlimitedness need not imply that he has all possible purposes; rather, it could imply that he is not subject to *external* constraints or limits. In other words, God is only bound by the properties of his own nature. Let us assume for the sake of the argument that this means the following: God cannot do evil because he is essentially good. God cannot make a rock bigger than he can lift because that would entail that his creative ability could conflict with his physical strength. God cannot make a round square or make $2+2=5$ (*pace* Descartes) because the laws of math, geometry, and logic are an expression of his nature, so it makes no sense to ask if he can contradict his own perfect nature. God is perfectly internally consistent with his own nature so we cannot pit his capacities or expressions of his character against each other.

Nozick argues that if God is unlimited, then “no human terms can truly apply to it (God)” because to describe God in one way would imply that he was limited by that property.⁶³ Nozick might be right in saying that human terms do not fully capture or define God's essence, but most theists would agree with him on this. John Scotus Eriugena argues that God reveals himself in such a way that we can talk about God by affirming certain names but remembering that God transcends the meaning of those words without saying that human terms can fully capture the essence of God.⁶⁴ Just as we can know something about the pattern of some particular numbers in an infinite set without fully grasping infinity, we could also know enough about God to distinguish between God and not God. Metz gives no argument for his conclusion that a purposive infinite God is not “theoretically comprehensible.”⁶⁵ He has also not done enough to show that God being infinite means that he is unlimited in Nozick's sense of the word and he does not give enough clarification on what it would even mean for God to not “be one way”. I argue that Nozick's notion of unlimitedness is

⁶³ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

⁶⁴ Katherine Rogers explains Eriugena's way of talking about God. “When we try to think about God, Eriugena holds, we are pushing the limits of human capacities. We cannot possibly wrap our minds around God just as He is. The closest we can come to understanding God is to affirm all those names which Scripture applies to Him, never forgetting that, because He is unity, God transcends any meaning we give these terms. Thus God is Good and Not Good, Wise and Not-Wise, Being and (yes!) Not-Being. And it is up to the human knower to keep both sides of the equation in mind at once. We do this by, in a way, transcending both *via affirmativa* and *via negativa* and opting the *via superlativa*, God is Super-Good, Super-Wise, etc. This is a sort of synthesis, says Eriugena, because although the terms are positive grammatically, they are negative in meaning” (1996), p. 169.

⁶⁵ Metz, (2013a), p. 113.

theoretically incomprehensible and thus could never be properly applied to God.

Further, Metz seems to be implying that no human terms can apply to God, and yet he is describing God as having these four properties. If no human terms can apply to God because he is unlimited, then Metz's explanation of the most promising God-centered view is self-contradictory since, one of the properties he includes makes it impossible to use the other properties to describe God. If this is true, then Metz has built a straw man (that he calls the most promising God-centered theory), and then attacked it by showing that it is incoherent, even though he explicitly states that his "position does not threaten God-centered theory as such."⁶⁶ Thus, his version of the most promising God-centered theory might not be the most promising God-centered theory after all. In fact it might be a really *bad* God-centered theory because it leads to internal incoherence and contradiction and it conflicts with most theists who believe that an atemporal or temporal God created the world.

5. A new argument for purpose theory

What else does this craving, and this helplessness proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.

Penseés, #148, Blaise Pascal

Metz asks if there are any other properties that God might have that would be necessary to ground meaning in life. To begin to develop a new argument for purpose theory, consider the view that objective meaning in life requires fulfilling a purpose given to us by God and the overarching purpose God gives us is to live in personal loving relationship with him. Further, suppose that a necessary element of meaning in life were relating in love to an essentially personal being. If this were the case, then God would have to be essentially multi-personal in order to already possess the quality of loving relational activity

⁶⁶ Metz, (2013a), p. 114.

and be able to invite others into that activity.⁶⁷ Lets call this PT4: a person's life is objectively meaningful if and only if:

- (i) One is intentionally created by an essentially and necessarily multi-personal, purposive, relational, omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God.
- (ii) God provides one with a good, significant, and rational purpose that provides lasting psychological/existential satisfaction: living in a loving relationship with God.
- (iii) One fulfills that purpose by means of a free choice

Thus, God must exist, be essentially multipersonal and give one a purpose of living in loving relationship with him in order for one to have objective meaning in life, contra Metz's claim that God is not necessary for objective meaning in life and that even if God exists he could not give us a purpose. I argue, that one must fulfill this purpose freely because a good God values the free will of persons so much that he will not coerce anyone to live in relationship with him.

One possible worry about this argument is that if meaning were about being in relationship with someone else, there could be an infinite regress of relations because one could always ask: what makes the being one is related to meaningful? Only a being that is intrinsically meaningful could stop this regress. Thus, I argue that only a multi-personal God/supernatural being that exists necessarily and essentially in perfect relation with the persons within him/herself could ground this kind of meaning. It is important to note that a monistic or unitarian God could not relate with itself in any meaningful way and thus could not stop the regress. Borrowing from Augustine's view of the Trinity, I propose that if God exists, he is essentially or necessarily personal, relational, and purposive because the three persons of the trinity perfectly relate with each other in free, purposive, loving, activity.⁶⁸ On this view God need not be a temporal, immutable, or perfectly simple in every respect. God's good, loving, all knowing character is immutable, while each person in the Godhead need not be immutable in that they are constantly active toward the other persons and

⁶⁷ Part of my motivation for responding to this argument was stimulated by Tim Mawson's suggestion: "Further work on how certain properties uniquely had by God would ground meaningfulness would be helpful". Mawson (2013), p. 1142.

⁶⁸ See St. Augustine, (1958), Book XI, Chap 24, p. 233.

towards creation. God is still one God, qua God, and thus simple but God exists as three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) within the Godhead and in this respect is not simple. Further, God does not *need* to create creatures in order to be purposive or relational with other persons because each person of the trinity already has the eternal purpose of living in relationship and glorifying the other two persons through free loving activity within the Godhead. So God is relationally self-sufficient (*a se*) and thus creates out of an overflow and not a lack. When God created human beings as ontologically distinct from himself, he created them for *his* ultimate purpose of glorifying himself, and further, he designed human beings in such a way that their greatest joy, highest good, and most meaningful activity is to glorify God through freely chosen acts of love, first towards God and then other human beings, thereby giving human beings a purpose that they can freely choose to fulfill.⁶⁹

This account blocks Metz's novel argument against purpose theory in three ways. First, if one accepts that meaning in life is relational, nature could not ground meaning in life because it is not essentially personal, relational, or purposive. Second, the qualities of a multi-personal God do not conflict with purposiveness, so a multi-personal God *could* provide a purpose and create beings for a non-arbitrary reason. And third, *only* a multi-personal God could ground meaning as purpose in life because only a multi-personal God could be essentially purposive and relational. A supernatural being that was not multi-personal would lack relationship and would lack an intentional object for purposive activity before it created and thus could not ground meaning as purpose.

One might accuse me of proposing this account of purpose theory ad hoc. Metz might say, "Ok you have created an elaborate conception of God that

⁶⁹ This argument is not really brand new, it is adapted from Tim Keller who quotes C.S. Lewis, in his book *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (2011). Keller writes "Each person of the Trinity glorifies the other. In the words of my favorite author, C.S. Lewis, "In Christianity God is not a static thing ... but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance." Theologian Cornelius Plantinga develops this further, noting that the Bible says the Father, the Son, and the Spirit glorify one another: "The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, and defer to one another. ...Each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance, each person envelops and encircles the others. ...God's interior life [therefore] overflows with regard for others." (p. 6). "What does it all matter?" Lewis writes. "It matters more than anything else in the world. The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us ...[Joy, power, peace, eternal life] are a great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality" (p. 8). Keller quotes Lewis from *Mere Christianity* (1977), p.151, and Plantinga from *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living* (2002), pp. 20-23.

meets my demands by adding a bunch of qualities to God, but do any theists actually endorse this view?" To which I would respond, yes, many Christian theists throughout the ages have accepted a Trinitarian conception of God. One only needs to read William Hasker's new book *Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (2013) to see the history of Trinitarian theology beginning in the fourth century with Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, to Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, John Zizioulas, Bryan Leftow, Peter van Inwagen, Jeffrey Brower, Michael Rea, William Lane Craig, Richard Swinburne, Keith Yandell and William Hasker. These thinkers along with St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, Jean Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Wesley and countless other theologians and philosophers are committed to Trinitarian doctrine and most deem it as a central and vital tenet of orthodox Christianity. Metz still might argue that I am appealing to authority. I grant that this is an appeal to the historical doctrines of Christianity. However, we are trying to figure out the strongest version of God-centered theories and not necessarily to give an argument to prove they are true. Metz also appeals to the historical doctrines to develop his version of God-centered theory.⁷⁰ Still, there is evidence in the Christian Bible that points to God being tri-personal, including the accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus is baptized and the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove and the Father speaks from Heaven.⁷¹ Further, there are a-priori and a-posteriori arguments for the doctrine of the trinity that Richard Swinburne has developed. The a-priori argument is roughly, "from the need for any divine being to have another divine being to love sufficiently to provide for him a third divine being whom to love and by whom to be loved."⁷² In other words, perfect unselfish love requires at least three persons. His a-posteriori argument is:

Most people who have believed the doctrine of the Trinity have believed it on the basis of the teaching of Jesus as interpreted by the church. The only reason for believing this teaching would be if Jesus led the kind of life which a priori we would expect an incarnate God to live in order to identify with our suffering, make atonement for our sins, and to reveal

⁷⁰ "First, the most influential statements on the meaning of life in the Western religious tradition are clear instances of God-centered theory". Metz, (2013a), p. 107.

⁷¹ Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22 (ESV).

⁷² Swinburne, Richard (2013) pp. 13-27.

truth to us; culminated by a miracle which God alone could do and which would also authenticate the teaching. Given good a posteriori evidence for the existence of God, there is enough historical evidence to make it probable that Jesus did live that sort of life, and so to believe the doctrine of the Trinity (2013: 13).

In order to refute this version of purpose theory Metz would need to engage with arguments like these to show that God could not be a trinity. On the Trinitarian view God's primary activity amongst the three persons is relating in love, thus it seems that the highest purpose he could give his creation is to lovingly relate with him. I have provided at least a few historical and philosophical reasons to believe that if God exists he is tri-personal and therefore there is good reason to think that God *could and would* provide us with a purpose of living in loving relationship with him.

Finally, I argue that God is *necessary* for objective meaning in life because, contra Metz, nature cannot provide us with a purpose, nor can it lovingly relate with us, which I have posited is a necessary element of objective meaning in life. Metz could still argue that living in a loving relationship with God is not necessary for objective meaning in life. My brief reply is to say that loving relationships seem essential to what Metz calls "the fundamental conditions of human existence" which include the good, the true and the beautiful.⁷³ In agreement with Metz I think that we must orient our rationality towards these fundamental conditions. I diverge from Metz where he argues that these fundamental conditions do not require the existence of and a relationship with God. I argue that it is only God that gives the other fundamental objects that we pursue their final value. The good, true, and beautiful do not have the kind of final value that Metz argues they do, if they are grounded in nature. Value requires a value giver and nature cannot give objective value. Humans are the only beings in nature that we know of that can give things *subjective* value by valuing things and pursuing them as having value, but humans cannot maintain or sustain the objective value of anything because they are contingent, finite, mutable beings. For example, if all the humans on earth suddenly died, and then aliens came to earth and discovered banks full of cash, the cash would have no value to the aliens because they would not recognize it as valuable.

⁷³ Metz, (2013a), p. 222.

I have not come across another convincing naturalist theory of value that provides a sufficient ground for objective value that is not subject to the same problems of mutability, subjectivity, and contingency. Thus, I argue that God is the only being that can give things objective value. God is eternal, and his character is immutable so his values do not change, and he has inherent value within himself because each person of the trinity eternally values the other as they relate to each other in love. This means that God is essentially valuable, purposive, and relational and thus is the only sufficient source of meaning in life. Thus, if God did not exist, and did not give one a purpose, anything else that one directed one's life toward would not have final or objective value and thus one's life would be meaningless. This of course, is a brief response in need of development but, I hope it stimulates discussion on this incredibly important topic.

6. Conclusion

I conclude that Metz's master argument against purpose theory fails in two main ways. First, he fails to show that God *must* be immutable, infinite, simple, and atemporal in order to be necessary and sufficient for grounding meaning in life. The reasons he does give have been shown to be faulty or not sufficiently supported. Second, even if one accepts that God must have the qualitative properties above, I have shown that there are plausible ways that the purpose theorist can respond to avoid the conclusion that a God with those properties could not be purposive.

Metz presents his readers with a false dilemma. In effect, Metz claims that either one must accept that nature is sufficient for meaning or accept that the most promising account of God-centered theory is that God must be a temporal, immutable, simple, and infinite. If one accepts that nature is sufficient, he thinks, one must admit that God is not necessary and abandon the God-centered view. If, on the other hand, one accepts the most promising account of God-centered theory, Metz' thinks that one should abandon purpose theory.

I have argued that accepting his God-centered view does not imply that God could not be purposive. I have also argued that we do not need to accept that God having the qualities of a temporality, immutability, simplicity, and infinitude is the best God-centered view of meaning. Finally, I have proposed a new argument for purpose theory that addresses Metz's arguments and blocks

two main objections one could make against it. PT4 includes the claim that God being necessarily multi-personal, purposive, and relational is the best reason to think that God is necessary and sufficient for meaning in life. I have given a few reasons to accept purpose theory as the correct theory of meaning in life. I conclude that purpose theory is neither incoherent nor inconsistent with God-centered views and thus has not been defeated by Metz's objections. I also conclude that God must both exist and one must freely fulfill the purpose of living in relationship with God in order to obtain objective meaning in life.

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[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

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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 H₂O. 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 H₂O. 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.

[Essay]

A Psychological Model to Determine Meaning *in* Life and Meaning *of* Life

Yu Urata*

Abstract

Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* (2013) offers considerable insights into previous philosophical theories and psychological research. It inspired aspects of this study, which presents a psychological model for the meaning of life that is grounded in a investigation of philosophical theory and psychological research. In this paper, I introduce three models: Model I (Framework), Model II (Elements), and Model III (Composition). Model I was a theoretical framework model based on philosophical, anthropological, and psychological theories. Model II was constructed using categorized data on the meaning of life drawn from various previous studies. Model III was constructed by integrating Models I and II. These models proposed four fundamental principles underlying meaning of life concepts: personal, relational, social/universal, and religious/spiritual. These principles formed a "nested" structure that unfolded from personal to relational to social/universal to religious/spiritual. Finally, I address differences between Metz's theory and my model and suggest another approach to the meaning of life.

1. Psychological approach to the meaning of life

As Metz notes, many modern theorists take the view from naturalism, whereas some philosophers still adopt the view from supernaturalism when tackling the meaning *of* life (Cottingham, 2003; Craig, 2000; Davis, 1987). Similarly, psychological research shows that people often associate meaning in their lives through a belief in the religious or spiritual realm (Debats, 1999; Ebersole & DePaola, 1987; Reker, 1996; Schnell & Becker, 2006). Religion and spirituality may serve a crucial function in restoring both the what and the why of our global sense-making assumptions, especially when unexpected traumatic events (e.g., sudden loss of a loved one, natural disasters) happen (Proulx, Markman, & Lindberg, 2013). Psychologists argue that supernaturalism affects behavior and attitudes irrespective of whether it is true or philosophically coherent. Therefore, it is an important issue in the psychology of meaning from

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the implicit theories approach. Implicit theories are laymen's beliefs regarding psychological constructs such as personality, intelligence, love, and meaningful life (Wong, 1998). They are numerous in the literature. They identify structures underlying conceptions of meaning by asking people to describe what is meaningful in their lives (e.g., Ebersole & DePaola, 1987; O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996; Schnell & Becker, 2006). From this point of view, I established psychological models that adopt implicit theories.

2. Psychological model about the meaning of life

There are two methods for academically examining the meaning of "the meaning of life": review philosophical theories, as attempted by Metz and/or review psychological research. I pursue both methods in a model that mediates theory and research. Predominantly, I construct three models: Model I (Framework), Model II (Elements), and Model III (Composition).¹

Model I (theoretical framework) is based on philosophical, anthropological, and psychological theories. Many philosophers and psychologists discern two or three fundamental meanings of life (Tables 1 and 2). Their categorizations generally distinguish concrete, terrestrial, subjective, and natural meanings from abstract, global, objective, and supernatural meanings as categorized by Metz. Some theorists distinguish "created or invented" meaning from "discovered or found" meaning (e.g., Baird, 1985; Frankl, 1963; Singer, 1992). Others distinguish objective from subjective meaning (e.g., Klemke, 2000; Smith, 2000; Markus, 2003; Metz, 2002). Metz also differentiates "part-life" from "whole-life" in thinking about the meaningful life. According to Metz, part-life means that only segments of a life in themselves are what can be meaningful, and whole-life means that only the narrative relationships among the parts of life are what can be meaningful (Metz, 2013a, pp.9-10).

These categorizations are parallel and categorical relations, but they include the relations indicated in Figure 1, which differentiates the meaning *of* life from meaning *in* life.²

¹ Yamada (2002) developed this method of constructing models to integrate abstract configurations and concrete arrangements of qualitative data.

² Metz (2001, 2013) also distinguishes meaning in life from meaning of life and focuses on the former.

Table 1

Conceptions about the Meaning of Life in Philosophy

Conceptions	Author
metaphysical / religious, secular / humanistic, pessimistic / nihilistic	Sanders & Cheney (1980)
ultimate, terrestrial	Edwards (1981)
discovered, created	Singer (1992)
intrinsic, extrinsic	Wiggins (1988)
pre-meaning, super-meaning, trans-meaning	Yamada (1999)
physical, moral, esthetic, religious	Hick (2000)
intrinsic, derivative	Joske (2000)
objective, subjective	Klemke (2000a); Smith (2000); Markus (2003)
individual, cosmic	Quinn (2000a)
axiological, teleological, complete	Quinn (2000b)
from within, from without	Taylor (2000); Aoki (2004)
meaning of life, meaning of a life	Adams (2002)
supernaturalism, naturalism	Metz (2001,2002,2007)
coherence, purpose, value	Markus (2003)
purpose, value, intelligibility / coherence	Thomson (2003)
answerable, ineffable	Cooper (2005)
subjective, intersubjective	Levy (2005)
teleology, hermeneutics, empiricism	Murayama (2005)
meaning of human life as such, meaning of an individual's life	Metz (2007)
whole life, part life	Metz (2013a)

Table 2

Conceptions about the Meaning of Life in Psychology

Conceptions	Author
cosmic, worldly/personal	Frankl (1963)
ultimate, terrestrial	Yalom (1980)
discover, create	Baird (1985); Kenyon (2000)
purpose, efficacy and control, value and justification, self-worth	Baumeister (1991)
objective, relative, subjective, appellative	Längle (1992)
meaning of life, meaning in life	Ebersole & DeVore (1995)
ultimate, provisional	Farran & Kuhn (1998)
self-glorification, self-transcendence	Hermans (1998)
importance, value-congruency, self-identity, absorption, enjoyment	Little (1998)
relational, personal	Wong (1998a)
ultimate, specific	Wong (1998b)
interpretive, directional	Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof (2000)
implicit/definitional, existential meaning, meaningfulness	Bar-Tur, Savaya, & Prager (2001)
situational, global	Folkman & Moskowitz (2000); Park (2005)
events, experience, existence	Bering (2003)
work/achievement, intimacy, relationships, spirituality, self-transcendence/generativity	Emmons (2003)
purpose, value, foundation	Kameda (2003)

Table 2 (Continued)

Conceptions	Author
belonging, doing, understanding self and world semi-religious, religious, humanistic	King (2004) Laverty, Pringle-Nelson, Kelly, Miket, & Jenzen (2005)
ultimate, personal, provisional phenomenological dimension, behavioral dimension, ontological dimension	Auhagen & Holub (2006) Leontiev (2007b)
high-order, low-order determinate, indeterminate	Orbach (2007) Peterson (2007)

Table 3

Categorization of Meaning (Model II)

Principle	Value orientation	Elements of meaning	Description
Personal	Subjective well-being	Health	Maintaining physical or mental health.
		Appearance	Smarten one's appearance
		Obtaining	Obtaining materialistic/monetary things
		Hedonism	Obtaining hedonistic pleasure
		Happiness	Feeling of pleasure and contentment
		Experiences	Experiencing various things
		Aesthetic	Giving oneself beautiful esthetic things
	Self-actualization	Self acceptance	Accepting one's limits and feeling fulfillment
		Life itself	Belief that life itself has meaning
		Goal attainment	Making an effort to attain one's goal
		Responsibility	having a responsibility and autonomy
		Growth	Developing one's competency and skills
		Actualizing potential	Identifying one's potential and trying to actualize it
		Creativity	Creating something
Relational	Interpersonal relationships	Lifework	Engaging occupation, job
		Understanding	Having a wider sense of judgment and understanding many things
		Family	Maintaining good relationship with family
		Approval/Respect	Being recognized from others and respected
		Friendship	Keeping good relations with a close friend
Social/ Universal	Collective/ Universal values	Romantic relationship	Having the intimacy in romantic relationships
		Service	Helping other people who are socially troubled
		Morality	Considering justice and morality to be important
		Truth	Seeking after the truth
		Contribution to society	Having the social/political belief
		Flame keeping	Following a tradition of the culture and maintaining a valuable thing
		Relationship with nature	Recognizing that mankind is a part of the nature and feeling connected to it
Religious/ Spiritual	Self-transcendence	Evolution/Generativity	Passing on one's genes and contributing the human existence and evolution
		Religious belief	Finding faith in God and connecting to God
		Spirituality	Keeping the connection with spiritual and higher being

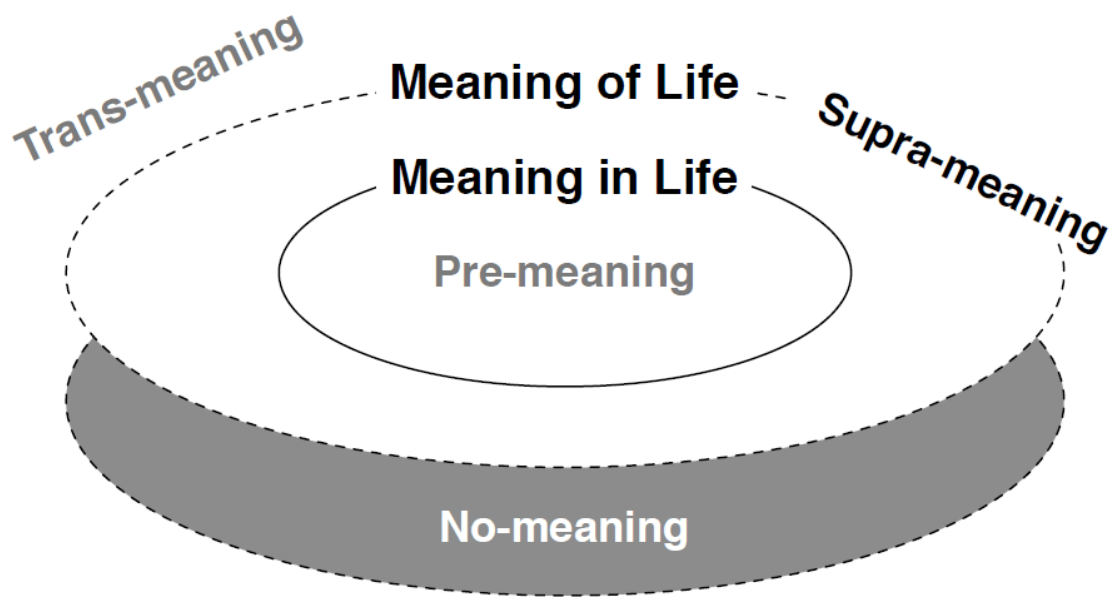


Figure 1 *Theoretical Model of Meaning of Life*

This distinction is common among professional philosophers as Metz notes:

The former [meaning in life] concerns a desirable, higher property that a person’s life can exhibit to a certain degree, whereas the latter [meaning of life] is a feature of the human species as such or of the universe in toto, e.g., a source of these wholes (having sprung from God) or a pattern they could exhibit (developing toward a telos) (Metz, 2013b, p.406).

Psychologists also suggested similar distinction:

“Meaning in life” must be differentiated from “meaning of life.” The latter refers to the metaphysical question of why the human race in general exists. Meaning in life is concerned with the most central, personal, individual values of people. The majority of empirical investigations of meaning in life, or a more commonly used phrase, “purpose in life”, have explored the relationship of other variables to differing degrees of intensity or depth of meaning in life (Ebersole & DeVore, 1995, p.41).

With reference to Metz (2013a), meaning *in* life includes subjectivism, and meaning *of* life includes subjectivism, objectivism, and supernaturalism. Meaning *in* life is subsumed under meaning *of* life in the model.

The model is best represented as concentric circles of meaning. If life is meaningful because a deity or soul instills it with purpose or reason, daily life may be meaningful and fulfilling. Having a global purpose (e.g., to do good or to achieve cultural immortality) might make every personal activity meaningful.³

Furthermore, in light of other literature, I propose the related concepts of pre-meaning, supra-meaning, trans-meaning, and no-meaning. Victor Frankl explained that supra-meaning is also called ultimate meaning, as follows:

[S]upra-meaning is no longer a matter of thinking but rather a matter of believing. We do not catch hold of it on intellectual grounds but on existential grounds, out of our whole being, i.e., through faith (Frankl, 1988, p.145).

Japanese philosopher Kunio Yamada (1998) defined pre-meaning and trans-meaning. The former is a way of living in which people do not quest after life's meaning or worth because they are callow or unconscious. The latter is "the way of living where he or she transcends the dual view of meaning or no meaning, and does not quest for 'why' question" (Yamada, 1998, p.305).⁴ Thus pre-meaning is the fusion or undifferentiated states, whereas trans-meaning transcend both pre-meaning, meaning and no meaning. Therefore, I mapped supra-meaning at the perimeter of the exterior circle, pre-meaning into the center of circle as inherent meaning, and trans-meaning into the outside the meaning of life (and no-meaning) circle.

No-meaning is the experience of emptiness or meaninglessness. It might arise from encountering instances of meaninglessness *in* life or generalized global meaninglessness *of* life, which is similar to the meaning circle. Therefore, I mapped no-meaning as a shadow under the meaning of the life circle.

Model II was constructed from data in previous psychological studies (Table 3). Earlier studies isolated different sources of meaning, but they also identified common sources such as relationships, growth, pleasure, service, and religious

³ The same might be said about many forms of absolutism, including totalitarianism and religious cults.

⁴ Yamada (1998) quotes Meister Eckhart, Hasidism, and Zen Buddhism as exemplars of trans-meaning.

belief. Model II proposes four principles underlying meaning of life concepts: personal, relational, social/universal, and religious/spiritual.

Model III integrates Models I and II. Four principles from Model II form a “nested” structure that unfolds from the personal to the relational to the social/universal to the religious/spiritual (Figure 2). The circle that circumscribes meaning *in* life includes personal and relational meaning, and the circle that circumscribes meaning *of* life envelops all principles.

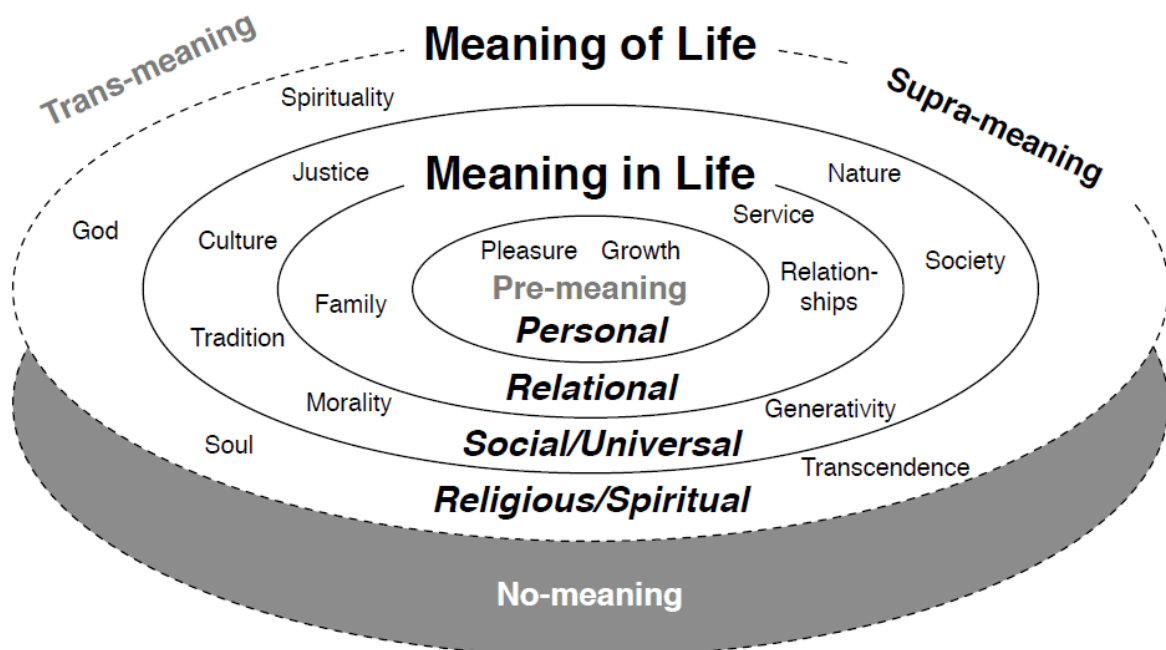


Figure 2 *Psychological Model of the Meaning of Life*

3. Model as a psychological version of Metz’s theory

My model has many resemblances to Metz’s theory. Both differentiate specific from global meaning and natural from supernatural meaning.^{5,6} Both suggest that life has natural meaning without need for a god or soul. Both offer fundamental frameworks for the meaning of life.

However, Metz and I differ in substantial ways. I regard every view of life

⁵ I divided questions about the meaning of life into these two dimensions when interviewing research subjects (Urata, 2013).

⁶ In my definition, supernaturalism and objectivism may be meaning *of* life and subjectivism meaning *in* life.

as psychologically real and true for people who seek meaning *in/of* life and disregard their philosophical rigor. Unlike analytic philosophers, I do not judge the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of one's life by a final value. I try to understand each person's interpersonal view of life, to see relationships between the meaning of life and other psychological conditions and to find support for people who lose their life's meaning.

Metz and I also differ in our stances regarding transcendental perspectives of meaning (i.e., supra-meaning and trans-meaning). Transcendental perspectives may be naive and might or might not be germane to any meaning of life, but they are motivationally significant in the quest for meaning. It is interesting that since ancient times, similar views concerning trans-meaning emerge in Eastern and Western cultures and are treated as the omega of human existence (e.g., perennial philosophy).

Our third difference is in the distinction between theory and model. Metz developed his theory by presenting desiderata step-by-step. And they were presented as sentences. However, my visual model mediates data from psychological research and frameworks of philosophical theory. A visual model depicts discrete phenomena comprehensively and captures patterns in personal systems of meaning. Recently I apply this model to analyze meaning of life narratives and developed a method to assess the breath, depth, and coherence of meaning (Urata, 2013).

The final difference is in how we examine meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life. Metz sees these two as different categories. I accept those categorizations, but my model suggests additional perspectives and more inclusive relationships. Psychological research suggests that low-level narratives of meaning relate solely to private meaning in life such as pleasure and comfort, whereas, high-level narratives span the range from private meaning *in* life to global meanings *of* life (O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). I also found that eminent narratives regarding the meaning of life are elaborately connected to both meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life (Urata, 2013). Thus, it might be better to regard the meaning *in* life as included in the meaning *of* life.

4. Conclusion

Theorists who consider the meaningful life cannot avoid Metz's work, although other viewpoints (e.g., non-categorical perspectives) deserve

consideration. Laymen seldom have clear answers regarding life's ultimate meaning, and they can be ambivalent about the meaning *of* life and the meaning *in* life (and meaninglessness). An individual could seek multiple levels of meaning and connect them explicitly or implicitly within internal systems of meaning.

Furthermore, as Metz notes, nihilists sometimes presuppose supernaturalism and sometimes undergo conversions to meaningfulness (e.g., Tolstoy) or trans-meaning (e.g., Zen Buddhism). Scholars must acknowledge laymen's mixed or ambivalent views about the meaning of life and suspend judgment about their truth. The model comprising the concentric circles aids understanding of implicit systems of meaning.

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Assessing Lives, Giving Supernaturalism Its Due, and Capturing Naturalism

Reply to 13 Critics of *Meaning in Life*

Thaddeus Metz*

1. Introduction

It is astonishing to encounter in this special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* more than 225 pages of critical discussion of my book *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (a précis of which can be found elsewhere in this volume). To make my reply to this great amount of penetrating thought manageable, and to make it readable, I have elected to focus on three overarching themes that capture a large majority of the analysis.

One recurrent issue is how to assess a life, or how to understand meaning as a value-theoretic category. In *Meaning in Life* I do so by: evaluating the lives of *individuals*, not of the human race as a whole; contending that a life has two *dimensions* by which to exhibit meaning, in terms of its parts and in terms of it as a whole; *comparing* lives from outside their first-personal standpoints and ranking them with judgments such as that one life has more meaning in it than another; and seeking out at least some *universal* claims about meaning, ones that apply to all human persons and not merely those in a particular country or society. In this volume, Peter Baumann, Masahiro Morioka, James Tartaglia, Hasko von Kriegstein and Sho Yamaguchi have particularly been the ones to question these facets of my approach to assessing the meaning in people's lives, which concern mainly part one of the book.

A second salient theme in this issue has to do with the status of supernaturalism, the general view that God or a soul, as normally construed in the monotheist tradition, is necessary for meaning in life. With regard to supernaturalism, in the book I argue that: an *immortality requirement is implausible*, i.e., a life that will end is compatible with there being meaning in it; the most influential instance of supernaturalism, *purpose theory*, is *questionable*

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because it is incompatible with the best motivation for holding any supernaturalism; and most *supernaturalists hold incoherent beliefs* at an implicit level. Here, Jason Poettcker, Nicholas Waghorn and Fumitake Yoshizawa take issue with my defences of these positions, which appear in part two of *Meaning in Life*.

The third topic that stands out in the contributions concerns which physical features of a life confer meaning on it, supposing a naturalist approach is broadly correct. In my work, I contend that they: are essentially constituted by the *deliberate* exercise of intelligence; are *deontological* in the sense of not being solely a function of long-term desirable consequences that a life produces; and include positive engagement with the *fundamental* features of human existence, at least when the meaning is great. Christopher Ketcham, Minao Kukita, David Matheson, Mark Wells and Yu Urata have provided prima facie reason to doubt these facets of my favoured understanding of the nature of meaning in life, advanced in part three of my book.

In the following I naturally see what there is to be said in defence of my views as initially expressed in *Meaning in Life*. However, I hope the reader finds that I do not do so in a defensive way. I have appreciated the opportunity to reconsider so many core claims of the book, and I am pleased to admit where I need to reflect still more on them and where I need to change them.

If one of the key claims of the book still seems true, namely, that searching for what makes a life meaningful is itself a source of meaning, then it is apt for me to express gratitude to the contributors to, and the editor of, this volume for having conferred some meaning on my life. They have continued—indeed, broadened—the search with me.

2. Assessing Lives

In this section I address what one might call “pre-theoretic” or “methodological” issues. Here, critics raise queries not about what, if anything, can make anyone’s life more meaningful (which sections 3 and 4 address), but instead about whether that sort of question is even appropriate to seek to answer, at least in the way that I do in the book. In 2.1 below, I reply to the objection that enquiry into meaning is properly understood as being about the life of the species, not the lives of individuals. In 2.2, I respond to the claim that the meaning in a life inheres merely in its parts, not also the life as a whole. In 2.3, I

deal with arguments that meaning is not (very) comparable, as opposed to admits of comparison between periods of a life and even between lives. In 2.4, I rebut criticisms that my methods are incompatible with striving for a principle that might obtain warrant for having a universal scope.

2.1. *Which Life Matters Most?*

The title of my book, *Meaning in Life*, was meant to signify that I was not addressing what some others have in mind with talk of the meaning “of” life. I have been strictly interested in what, if anything, would confer meaning on the life of a given person, what would put more meaning into her life, not what might confer meaning on human life as such. However, James Tartaglia argues in his contribution that the latter issue is where the action is and what philosophers should be addressing.

His article is a robust challenge to the analytic approach taken towards life’s meaning not only by myself, but also by a majority of those currently writing in English on the topic. His implicit view is that I should not have published *Meaning in Life*, for a wide array of reasons, including that it does not address a truly philosophical topic and threatens to direct the field away from one that is.

Why does Tartaglia maintain that seeking to answer the question of what (in the physical world) makes a given person’s life meaningful, which he calls “social meaning”, is not really philosophical? He writes that my posing the

question about social meaning, however, could occur to anyone trying to figure out what to do with their life. Only in a tenuous sense could the essentially practical question of “how to get more meaning in my life” be construed as philosophical; and most people ask this question without getting into philosophical analysis (2015: 95).

I see three distinct suggestions here. One is that anyone trying to ascertain what to do with her life might readily pose the question of what would make her life meaningful. It is very hard for me to see why that should mean that the question is not philosophical. After all, the question of what counts as happiness or as moral wrongness or as justified belief “could occur to anyone trying to figure out what to do” with her life; does Tartaglia believe these also fail to count as philosophical questions?

A second suggestion is that most people address the question of what makes their lives meaningful “without getting into philosophical analysis”. I am not sure that this empirical claim is true. But if it is true, then, again, the same is true of happiness, wrongness and justification; after all, few people are acquainted with philosophical methods, ideas and texts. The fact that most might opt for answers from religious sources or self-help books does not mean philosophy is not relevant.

Tartaglia’s third, and most powerful, suggestion is that asking what would confer meaning on a particular life is “essentially practical”, whereas philosophical questions are not. For a third time, I make a “partners in guilt” argument in reply. Questions such as whether one should believe anything on faith (as opposed to live by evidentialism), whether one can have good reason to perform immoral actions, and how to act so as to avoid injustice are essentially practical, but would be deemed philosophical by most self-described “philosophers”.

Indeed, note that Tartaglia’s own article is largely making a practical point, but I presume that he considers it to be a work of philosophy nonetheless. He maintains that my approach “should not be held up as the Holy Grail” (2015: 103) and that “philosophers interested in either the meaning of life or social meaning should remain in Camelot”, i.e., should not go seeking for what might unify the good, the true and the beautiful as variable sources of meaning in people’s lives (2015: 109). If Tartaglia deems his article to be philosophical despite drawing conclusions about what philosophers *should do* with their time (viz., don’t publish books like Metz’s), then, by analogy, it seems apt to deem my book to be philosophical even though it draws conclusions about what people should do with their lives.

Finally, although asking about whether and how a particular life might be meaningful is *more* practical than asking whether and how the life of the species might be meaningful, I deny that it is *thoroughly* practical. In fact, in the book I contended in several places that it is not (e.g., 2013: 68-69, 141-142, 147-150, 241). My position in *Meaning in Life* was that talk of meaning in people’s lives is by definition about a final value, where people’s choices might not be able to bring it about, either because, à la the nihilist, the world is structured so that meaning is available to no one, or because, my favoured view, sometimes people lack the requisite mental, social or material resources to realize it. “Although it is correct that meaning comes in degrees, that it varies within a life and also

between lives, and that we have pro tanto reason to seek more of it rather than less, these claims are consistent with the view that meaning is at bottom *evaluative* rather than *normative*.... (M)eaning is basically a *good* rather than a *should*” (Metz 2013: 142).

In sum, the question I pose about meaning in a life is not essentially practical, in the sense of exhaustively being about which choices people should make, and, even if it were, that would be insufficient to disqualify it as a philosophical topic (on pain of at least disqualifying Tartaglia’s own article as well). Consider, now, Tartaglia’s bold claim more directly:

(T)o ask whether the human species has a meaning is to ask the question of the meaning of life.... Rather than there being three topics “readily placed under the rubric of ‘the meaning of life’”, then – i.e. the meanings of my life, the species, and the universe – it seems to me that the situation is as follows. There is one question of the meaning of life (i.e. the human species) (2015: 94).

This point is trivially true if one distinguishes between questions about the meaning “of” life from those about meaning “in” life; Tartaglia’s point is rather that only the former is a genuine philosophical question.

However, Tartaglia’s own diagnosis of the field provides strong reason to doubt his narrow construal of meaning-talk. He points out that philosophers such as Nietzsche and Sartre “did not think there was a meaning of life, and hence sought to investigate how people can build up positive social meaning in a world without God. That is what the 20th century discourse of ‘authenticity’ concerned” (2015: 98-99; see also 97). I agree. This point is evidence in favour of my view that there are at least two distinct philosophical questions one can sensibly pose about life’s meaning, whether the human species has a meaning and how a given individual might be able to exhibit meaning in her life (even if the species as a whole lacks meaning).

Most post-war philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition have followed Nietzsche’s and Sartre’s lead in letting go of the search for a meaning “of” human life as such and instead considering what meaning might be available “in” particular lives and, more often than not, from within a purely

physical world.¹ That is, a majority have been what I call “naturalists”, maintaining that meaning is to be found in a purely physical world, with much of the debate being about whether meaning in life is subjective or objective and which particular version of these broad views is most defensible.

There are occasions in his article when Tartaglia does not maintain that there is no distinct philosophical issue of meaning in life, and instead is inclined to grant that there is one or that a case could be made for one (2015: 98, 102). Here, Tartaglia maintains that one cannot philosophize well about meaning in life without first exploring the meaning of life, and hence without engaging in the rich Continental literature devoted to the latter (2015: 94, 96, 98-99; cf. Urata 2015: 222). I believe that is true in one sense, but false in another.

To make my point, I need to draw some distinctions. First, consider a distinction about the *object of analysis*, i.e., whether one is interested in the meaningfulness of (a) the human species as a whole or (b) particular human persons. Second, consider a distinction regarding the *source of meaning* for the relevant object, that is, whether one is interested in meaning insofar as it is conferred by (c) something beyond the human, physical realm or (d) something within it.

Now, when Tartaglia speaks of meaning “of” life he is combining (a) and (c), and strictly contrasting it with the combination of (b) and (d), which concerns “social meaning” in his terms. His construal of the debate glosses the possibility of an orthogonal combination between the two distinctions, viz., between (b) and (c), and it is precisely such a combination that is at the core of not only my project in *Meaning in Life*, but also much recent English-speaking philosophical literature on life’s meaning.

My enquiry was never meant to be restricted to (b) and (d). I intended to restrict myself solely to (b), and not to address (a), but to be open to the idea that the source of meaning in (b) could come from either (c) or (d) or both. In other words, I, with a large majority of other analytic philosophers, have been interested in knowing what might make the lives of particular individuals more or less meaningful, and I have been interested in whether the meaning might come from something supernatural or natural or both.

So, I believe Tartaglia is right that in order to answer the question of whether a particular life is meaningful, one must ask *about (c)*, e.g., whether God is

¹ Notice that the psychological literature in the post-war era, which Tartaglia chides me for neglecting, has also overwhelmingly focused on “meaning in life”, on which see Ebersole and DeVore (1995: 41).

necessary for any of our lives to have meaning in them. That is why I spend the entire second part of the book enquiring into the merits and demerits of supernaturalism. The reader will note that I conclude that God's existence could enhance meaning in our lives insofar as we, say, love Him, but that we could exhibit meaning in them even if He did not exist (Metz 2013: 158-160).

But that does not mean that the *combination of (a) and (c)* must be considered in order to address (b). In fact, *this* combination appears logically irrelevant to being able to answer any question about (b). Questions about (b) are, as I articulate at the start of the book (Metz 2013: 4-6; see also 62-63), about whether an individual's life has more meaning in it at a given period than at another and about whether it has more meaning in it on balance than another's life. It is essentially about meaning insofar as it can *vary* over the course of a life and between lives. But posing a question about (a), whether human life as a whole is meaningful, is essentially to ask about an *invariant* sort of meaning, where if one person's life is meaningful to a certain degree, then, necessarily, so is another's by virtue of membership in the human species (cf. Tartaglia 2015: 93).

Hence, I do not think that I am the one guilty of "conflation" (Tartaglia 2015: 92, 96), for instance when I consider whether God is necessary for any one of our lives to be meaningful and, if so, how to relate to Him so as to secure more meaning rather than less. It is perfectly coherent to ask whether, for instance, our lives are meaningful merely to the varying degree that we as individuals succeed in fulfilling His purpose or in getting to Heaven where we meet Him. And it is false to contend that "any philosopher who thinks God endows our lives with meaning is talking about the traditional question" of whether the human species has meaning (Tartaglia 2015: 95). Leo Tolstoy wants to know how he can get to Heaven (1884: 18); Robert Nozick wants to know how he can connect in the right way to an unlimited, all-encompassing God (1981: 606-608); John Cottingham wants to know whether he will partake of the good, the true and the beautiful as constituted by God's mind (2003, 2005); and then monotheistic people by and large want to know how they (as distinct from the species as a whole) can obey God commandments (cf. Metz 2013: 77).

There are many other criticisms of my book amongst the buckshot of Tartaglia's article, and I lack the space to address them all, having taken up what I consider the most important ones. I close by addressing a final concern, that my book suggests that "both the continental literature and traditional question

are somewhat tangential, and can be safely ignored by those who are really serious about the ‘meaning of life’” (2015: 100; see also 102).²

In reply, for one, as I have worked to clarify in this section, I believe that there are simply two different sorts of enquiry with regard to life’s meaning, that about human life as such and that about particular human lives. I elected to focus on the latter in *Meaning in Life*, and did not mean to disparage the former.

For another, there is *of course* relevant and worthwhile material in the Continental tradition and in other ones, too, including the African, the Confucian and the Buddhist. I tried in the book to explain that I was focusing on Anglo-American literature because I needed to “obtain focus and to make my task manageable” (2013: 9) as well as because that literature “is large enough to work through and evaluate on its own” (2013: 9). It is unfortunate that these remarks did not register. *Meaning in Life* stands at 130,000 words; I found more than enough in a certain body of scholarship, which tends to share certain presuppositions, to keep me busy. Meanwhile, several others had already addressed Continental thinkers on the topic of life’s meaning in book-length discussions (e.g., Singer 1996; Belliotti 2001; and especially Young 2003).

I naturally acknowledge that a more comprehensive analysis, one more likely to ground any strong claim to universal validity, would take up cross-cultural engagements, ones that I have begun in earnest in other works since the publication of *Meaning in Life* (e.g., Metz 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b). Indeed, much of the point of my helping to produce the present special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* was precisely to encourage dialogue between Anglo-American perspectives and others, particularly from East Asia.

2.2. *Where Is the Meaning in a Life?*

To speak of a “life’s” being meaningful is vague. What is a life, and which aspects of a life can have meaning or lack it? In the third chapter of *Meaning in Life* I address one facet of these queries, concerning whether it is the parts of a life, or life as a whole, or both that can be meaningful. My answer is the latter, “impure” or “mixed” view, according to which there are two independent dimensions by which to appraise a life, roughly, in terms of particular

² In 2.4 below, I address one more of Tartaglia’s many objections, regarding whether a view of linguistic reference that I advance undercuts the chance of making a universally valid claims about the nature of meaning.

spatio-temporal slices, whether they be actions, projects or even more attitudinal ways of approaching the world, on the one hand, and how the slices are patterned over the life as a whole, on the other.

Hasko von Kriegstein contends that my arguments for a mixed view are too quick, and that a pure part-life view is still to be taken seriously. He temptingly suggests that since my discussion of the whole-life dimension is by my own lights sketchy in *Meaning in Life*, the overall contribution made there could be seen as more complete, were I simply to drop adherence to such a dimension.

Furthermore, a chunk of von Kriegstein's strategy is to appeal to some of my own claims against me; I acknowledge in the book that there are often relational dimensions to what makes something meaningful (2013: 34-35, 66-68, 210, 218, 221), and von Kriegstein ingeniously contends that upon careful consideration of them, one need not appeal to the *largest* relational context, viz., between all the parts within a whole-life, in order to account for the intuitive presence of meaning in the cases I discuss. "(I)f a part of my life can be (and typically is) meaningful in virtue of its relational properties, what reason is there to reject a pure part-life view of the bearers of meaning? After all, we could simply say that the bearers of meaning are always parts of a life but that these parts are sometimes meaningful in virtue of their relations to other parts" (von Kriegstein 2015: 7); there is no need to posit the whole itself as something that can be meaningful.

This move is powerful, and is indeed one that I neglected in the book. Upon reflection, I am inclined to think that von Kriegstein's strategy is successful, or at least promising, for many cases, for instance that of posthumous meaning (von Kriegstein 2015: 14). However, to keep things succinct and to push the debate forward, I focus on cases in which it does not look so promising, and where it instead appears that a whole-life dimension, or something approximating it, most easily entails that, and best explains why, there is meaning intuitively present.

Consider first the issue of repetition in a life. Part of what accounts for the lack of meaning in the case of Sisyphus, as well as in lives spent in prison or on an assembly line, is the lack of variety. As von Kriegstein notes, it is not merely the likely boredom that I contend accounts for the lack of meaning; it is also the fact of sameness in the content of the activities undertaken over time. In reply, von Kriegstein is inclined to bite the bullet. "Would we really want to say of a doctor who spends her entire life curing malaria without ever getting bored or

blasé about it that her life would have been more meaningful if instead she had invested some of her time in other meaningful activities (such as appreciating exquisite art or, even, curing yellow fever)?" (von Kriegstein 2015: 10-11).

I myself am inclined towards a different view about the case of curing yellow fever. In addition, a doctor who learns from the process of treating malaria and finds, say, cheaper ways to do so would, it seems to me, have more meaning than one who stuck with same treatment time after time.

However, there is a deep point to be made on von Kriegstein's behalf with the case of appreciating art. In the book I suggested that a life with variety has some (*pro tanto*) more meaning in it than one with repetition. But appreciating art and discovering a new treatment for malaria would be comparably effective ways for von Kriegstein's malaria doctor to avoid repetition and introduce variety into her life. Indeed, the former might have more in its favour on this score. And so what von Kriegstein has probably shown is that it is not variety *as such* that is a plausible candidate for enhancing meaning. At this stage it appears to be development or advancement (or perhaps creativity, as per Richard Taylor 1987) that is key; and these bode well for the view that a whole-life can bear meaning.

One sort of development or advancement is redemption, which Charles Taylor, for one, appeals to as evidence in favour of a whole-life dimension to meaning. He remarks, "We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fullness... But this means our whole lives. If necessary, we want the future to 'redeem' the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity" (1989: 50).

Against this, von Kriegstein points out that redemption can occur within a less-than-whole stretch of a life, or perhaps even in two parts of a life (as distinct from any stretch), and need not be a function of the whole. In *Meaning in Life* I considered the case of a young woman who had engaged in prostitution to feed a drug addiction but who eventually became a counsellor to help others avoid such a lifestyle. In contrast to the case of variety above, von Kriegstein grants there is meaning to be accounted for here, but makes two objections to the idea that it is a whole-life that does the work.

First, and most boldly, von Kriegstein contends that it is plausible to think that "the additional meaning in cases like this inheres in both the redeemed and redeeming parts rather than in the pattern itself" (2015: 13). His thought is that it

is the *period of being an addicted prostitute* that becomes less meaningless when it causes (or otherwise figures into the production of) something good, and that it is the *period of being a counsellor* that is arguably more meaningful if it was caused by something bad. Such a view contrasts with a whole-life view according to which it is the *pattern*, the *relationship* between the periods, that is meaningful.

It can be a difficult matter to choose between these two descriptions of what bears meaning. Is something, say, an *action* meaningful in virtue of its relational properties such as its effects, on the one hand? Or is a *relation* meaningful in virtue of its relata such as an action and its effects, on the other? von Kriegstein is maintaining that the former would invariably suffice, or at least does so in the redemption case.

I agree that one sensibly could evaluate the periods of life as separate bearers of meaning. It is not unreasonable to focus on the period of being an addicted prostitute and then to judge it to be somewhat less meaningless in virtue of its relational properties, specifically, the good ones they brought about in the future. The issue is whether such an approach *exhausts* the sort of judgment that we are inclined to make and without apparent mistake.

When I put myself in the shoes of the counsellor and look back on my life, I do not merely think of the two periods of my life and then add them together, which is all that I should do if von Kriegstein's approach were sound. I do not *first* think of the period of being an addicted prostitute, noting that it caused me to become a counsellor, and *then* think of the period of being a counsellor, noting that it was caused by having been an addicted prostitute, and *finally* aggregate the two periods for an overall assessment of meaning.

I could do that, but it is not all that I am inclined to do. In the *first* instance, in fact, I instead attend to the pattern, the story. Looking back, I ascribe a certain value to the narrative properties of having undergone something undesirable but then having struggled to make something desirable come of it. Of course, I might be "in the grip of a theory", making my judgment idiosyncratic; the more that fellow readers are inclined to judge similarly, though, the more evidence that such judgment is part and parcel of philosophical reflection on meaning in life.

At this point von Kriegstein's second objection arises, which is to grant that there is meaning *in the pattern* here, but to deny that the pattern must extend over the entire life. "The fact that we are able to talk about the meaning of these

two parts and the pattern connecting them, without knowing anything else about our protagonist's life, seems a fair indication that it is not her whole life that bears the meaning in question but simply these two episodes" (von Kriegstein 2015: 13).

His point about this particular redemption case is fair. And I do not necessarily want to press talk of a "whole-life" too literally (cf. Metz 2013: 52). The key point I wanted to make in the book was to deny that slivers of space-time are the sole bearers of meaning. I had in mind utilitarians, for instance, who would maintain that the meaningfulness of a life is simply a function of the degree to which one's actions have fulfilled people's preferences. I agree that pulling a child out of the way from on-coming traffic can confer meaning on one's life, regardless of whatever else happens in one's life. What I deny is that evaluating meaning in life is merely a matter of totting up the desire satisfaction produced by all one's actions *seriatim*. So long as large stretches of a life are agreed to be able to bear some meaning, the most crucial claim from the book would stand.

However, there is more to be said that still leads me to think that a life as a whole can be a relevant, and perhaps even an important, bearer of meaning. For one, if one grants that some relationships between parts of a life can bear meaning, then "the camel's nose is inside the tent", by which I mean that there is little reason to deny that the relationships between parts over the entire life could also do so. I presume part of what makes an (auto)biography first-rate is the fact that it views all later stages of a life as a function of childhood (think "Rosebud" from *Citizen Kane*), or shows how all major stages have progressed from each other (analogous to the way spirit develops in Hegel's system). If a story about someone's life can be valuable in virtue of a whole-life perspective, presumably the whole-life that the story is about could be, too.

For another, since having composed *Meaning in Life* I have begun thinking more systematically about the distinction that some have drawn between "ultimate" and other, more "partial" or "incomplete" kinds of meaning (Nozick 1981: 599; Cooper 2003: 126-142; Bennett-Hunter 2014; Waghorn 2014). I did not give the distinction any weight in the book, but have been considering whether that was to neglect something important for thought about meaning in life (Metz 2016a, unpublished). One key idea is that for any meaningful facet of a life, it would be more meaningful if (several argue that it would be meaningful *at all only if*) it were related to something else in one's life that is meaningful,

and that the latter meaningful condition would in turn be more meaningful if related to something else meaningful, and so on until one has a view of how all the meaningful conditions of one's entire life could be interconnected. A good candidate for an ultimate kind of meaning in a life would be for it to include a chain of meaningful conditions throughout it as a whole. Or, returning to Charles Taylor's comments, an ultimate kind of meaning would plausibly be constituted by a constant development towards self-realization or by one's life forming a comprehensive unity.

Supposing I am in a position to look back on my life when on my deathbed, I hope I will be able to detect some kind of big picture. I would like to see a forest and not merely trees, not even just ones apprehended to be in causal or spatial relationships with one another. Am I alone in having such a wish?

2.3. Can One Compare Meaning between Lives?

In my work, I routinely compare the degrees of meaning intuitively to be found in two different courses of action, e.g., becoming a worker in a caring profession seems to promise much more meaning than electing to count blades of grass. I also compare the amount of meaning to be found in earlier and later periods of a life, e.g., my middle aged life as a thinker, teacher, lover and father is much more meaningful than it was when I was a depressed teenager dependent on drugs and doing what he could to skip school. Still more, I compare the extent to which entire lives have been meaningful, deeming Einstein's life to have been more meaningful than mine.

Such judgments are a function of two key elements. For one, I often take an external perspective on the (part of the) life, which means that, when judging, I am neither the one living it at the time, nor working within the viewpoint of the one whose life it is. For another, I rank (aspects of) lives, and do so not merely ordinally, such that I make some roughly quantified appraisals about how much meaning there is in them.

Masahiro Morioka and Minao Kukita reject any kind of external evaluation, while Peter Baumann accepts it but denies that it admits of much systematicity when it comes to assessing degrees of meaning between lives. In the following, I defend an external standpoint as a relevant approach to assessing lives, and then say more than I did in *Meaning in Life* about the respects in which one can judge the extent to which lives have meaning in them.

Morioka carefully and thoroughly articulates an approach to evaluating meaning in life that differs dramatically from the one I and the overwhelming majority of Anglo-American philosophers employ. In the first instance, his approach is strictly internal or first-personal, a matter of asking the individual whether she deems her life to be meaningful. In addition, it is what one might label “presentist”, for it asks a person to judge whether her life is meaningful as it is, and not whether it was meaningful, could be or will be. Still more, Morioka’s method is binary, rather than gradient; that is, one is to pose the question of whether one’s actual life is meaningful, not how much meaning is in it. Morioka calls the combination of an internal, presentist and binary judgment of meaning in one’s life “the heart of meaning in life”, which, as he points out, “transcends all comparisons” (2015: 60).

I am inclined to think that this standpoint could well be of some use when thinking about meaning. I find it strongly analogous to asking whether one has a headache. Asking whether one has a headache is of course perfectly appropriate, and would provide a certain understanding of what kind of state one is in and what one should do in light of it. Similarly, it is sensible to pose the question of whether one’s actual life is meaningful, and the answer one gives could be revealing and action-guiding.

However, I seriously doubt the much stronger claims that Morioka sometimes makes for the relevance of “the heart of meaning in life”. He maintains that “the heart of meaning in life” is the key vantage point by which to evaluate meaning.

Alas, does my life like this have any meaning at all? I believe that what is asked or lamented in the above question constitutes the very central content of meaning in life.... And we should note that throughout his book, Metz never talks about “the heart of meaning in life.” From my viewpoint, Metz fails to discuss the most important aspect of meaning in life in his academic discussion of this topic (Morioka 2015: 55, 56).

Although Morioka acknowledges that it can be coherent to adopt an external or non-presentist or gradient approach to issues of life’s meaning (2015: 57, 59), and although he does not quite say that only “the heart of meaning in life” is valid (but see 2015: 59), his claim is that the latter is to be much preferred to the former.

Similarly, Kukita writes, “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.... I cannot share the assumption that one can compare meaningfulness across people’s lives” (2015: 212).

I have not encountered a strictly noncomparative approach to life’s meaning before, so that Morioka’s and Kukita’s claim that it is key is original for all I know, relative to an English-speaking audience. In the following, I focus mainly on Morioka’s discussion, as his text suggests an argument for this strong claim.

At one point Morioka contends that posing the question of whether one’s actual life is meaningful “emerges from the deep layer of my heart when I notice that the solid psychological ground which was supporting the affirmative basis of my life has suddenly collapsed or disappeared into nothing” (2015: 55). I take his implicit reasoning to be that the importance of a philosophical perspective, at least when it comes to meaning in life, is a function of its emotional source. If I am led to question whether my life is meaningful because I am experiencing concern, fear, dread, angst or the like with regard to it, then that question is (so the argument goes) more weighty than other questions that spring from weaker emotions or from no emotion at all but from mere intellectual curiosity. One might put it this way: meaning in life should be approached in terms of what it would *mean to* the enquirer.³

Of course, one might reasonably doubt that the importance of a philosophical approach is strictly a function of its emotional source and the intensity thereof. Being a pluralist about philosophical methods, I am open to the idea that *one* reasonable way to choose amongst them is in terms of whether they satisfy certain emotional needs. But I am also open to the idea that additional reasonable ways to choose philosophical methods are based on what would be useful for the purposes of, say, obtaining important knowledge for its own sake, guiding public policy or relating to others in beneficent ways. Morioka must say more to convince someone who does not already share his view that the only or most reasonable way to choose a philosophical approach is on the basis of the enquirer’s emotional perspective.

Suppose, now, for the sake of argument, that the importance of a philosophical approach were solely a function of the degree to which it speaks to

³ Compare this approach with that advocated by Yamaguchi elsewhere in this volume (2015: 66-89) and discussed in 2.4 below.

the intense emotional life of the enquirer. Interestingly, it would not follow that the “the heart of meaning in life” is invariably the most vital method for thinking about life’s meaning. That is because one’s strongest emotions might be about not one’s own life, but rather that of someone else.

Consider someone who is more concerned that his children live meaningful lives than that he does. Think about a father who asks, “Alas, do the lives of my children as they are have any meaning at all?”. This question could well “emerge from the deep layer of his heart when he notices that the solid ground which was supporting the affirmative basis of their lives has suddenly collapsed or disappeared into nothing”. If so, then an external approach to meaning in life would be called for, and not the purely internalist “heart of meaning in life”, by the logic of what appears to be Morioka’s reasoning in defence of the latter.

Similar remarks apply to non-presentist and gradient methods; these, too, could be what would most satisfy a given enquirer’s deepest emotional concerns. Consider: “Alas, will the lives of my children have any meaning at all?”, or “Alas, will the lives of my children have any substantial meaning?”. These questions could also spring from the deepest layer of a father’s heart.

It is true that these questions are not the same as what Morioka calls “the heart of meaning in life”, but the present issue is why we should focus on the latter and not also the former to a comparable degree. The only argument Morioka seems to have provided for deeming “the heart of meaning in life” to be central is about its emotional source, but I have argued that people with strong other-regarding sentiments might not be led to “the heart of meaning in life”.

Finally, notice that, despite their official views that comparing meaning between lives cannot be done, both Morioka and Kukita seem to invite such comparisons at certain points in their articles. Morioka says, “The life of a person of no importance can have equal meaning to the life of a distinguished person” (2015: 53), which implies a comparison between them. And Kukita maintains that certain works of art are great, not that all works of art are great (2015: 211-212), which suggests the view that a life that has created great art is to some degree more important for having done so than a life that has not, all things being equal.

It would normally be offensive to tell someone that her life is not as meaningful as someone else’s, and perhaps this is influencing Morioka and Kukita to reject this kind of appraisal altogether (see Kukita’s mention of

insolence at 2015: 211). However, the fact that a judgment would be offensive to convey does not mean that the judgment would be false. After all, just because it would be offensive to tell someone that he is ugly does not mean that he is not. Our moral reticence to communicate certain judgments to others is one thing, and their truth or falsity is another.

Unlike Morioka and Kukita, Peter Baumann readily accepts that thought about life's meaning sensibly employs an external, non-presentist and gradient approach. His enquiry instead concerns how much precision (and organization) can be expected from such an approach. He reads *Meaning in Life* as suggesting that substantial precision (and organization) is available, and he provides serious reason to doubt that. Baumann is correct that reflection on interpersonal comparisons of meaning simply has not been undertaken in the field, and his article is a first, important step.

Baumann often works with the example of three lives, that of Euclid, Picasso and a second-rate painter, and I shall do the same. How precisely can we assess the degree of meaning in such lives? According to Baumann, not in any absolute way. What is typically available to us are comparative judgments that are true relative to certain variable purposes or standards.

When we compare Euclid's life with Picasso's life and judge that their lives are equally meaningful we use a very rough degree of granularity. We think about them as extraordinarily creative people in general who have made an important contribution. However, when we compare Picasso's life with the other painter's life we do in addition think of them as painters, perhaps even as painters of the same period. Our degree of granularity is much finer here (Baumann 2015: 39).

An important implication of this view is that there is an indeterminacy with regard to the question of how much meaning there is in one life compared to another, even working with just two lives (and so setting aside issues of transitivity). For Baumann, one cannot answer that in the abstract, and must first specify the context, where contexts can vary considerably.

There is then not just one ranking of lives with respect to meaning but several which differ as to the degree of granularity. Consider a rougher ranking and a finer-grained ranking of lives with respect to meaning. Even

if all the lives considered should have a definite position in the rougher ranking (e.g., Picasso, Euclid, the other painter and some others all equally high up...), they might not all have a definite place in the more fine-grained ranking. For instance, while Picasso's life is, according to our example, more meaningful than the other painter's life it is not clear where Euclid's life is located (Baumann 2015: 40).

I think that Baumann is correct that *one way* that we can and routinely do compare lives is relative to certain interests or contexts. One could use a "microscope" and focus on the meaningfulness of two people's paintings, on the one hand, or use a "naked eye" to assess creativity more broadly. The question is whether this is all that is available to us, and in the following I aim to provide some reason to think not.

If there is going to be some more absolute approach to comparing lives, it will likely be a function of the best theory available about what constitutes meaning in life. To see this point, first consider some analogies. If one wants to know whether one rock has more gold in it than another, answering that from some kind of human perspective as such should invoke the chemical analysis of gold as Au with atomic number 79. The more of that chemical, the more gold that is present, at least for any (near) absolute perspective available to human beings.

Similarly, if one wants to know whether one person was more morally wicked than another and to what degree, it would make sense to appeal to the most defensible philosophical account of what it means to live immorally. Presumably such a theory would entail (amongst other things) a ranking of wrong acts,⁴ so that, e.g., killing one's spouse for the insurance money is worse than breaking a promise to meet a student in order to play pinball.

Not only would the theory entail that some acts are more wrong than others, but it would also indicate the rough extent to which one act is more wrong than another. For instance, the degree to which killing for money (A) is worse than breaking a promise for amusement (B) is greater than the degree to which breaking a promise for amusement (B) is worse than forgetting to pay for one's share of office coffee (C). The space between A and B on the imagined scale is larger than the space between B and C.

⁴ The next remarks about degrees of wrongness are cribbed from Metz (2002a: 282).

Although one is hard pressed to say exactly how much space there is between these acts (and there might well in principle not be any precise answer to that question), wrongness plausibly has degrees of at least the two sorts just noted. And, so, assessing the extent to which two people have been morally wicked in their lives would involve appealing to such *rough* cardinal judgments of wrongful behaviour.

Now, what goes for the disvalue of wrongness plausibly goes for the value of meaningfulness. If there were a plausible theory of what constitutes meaning in life, akin to theories of what constitutes gold and immorality, then it could be used to ground comparisons of meaning between lives that are independent of more particular purposes and idiosyncratic standards. And I of course think there is such a theory, namely, the fundamentality theory that I advance in *Meaning in Life* (Metz 2013: 219-239, 249).

The fundamentality theory is not simple, and there is probably no fact of the matter about how *exactly* to weigh its various elements against each other. Even so, if the theory were true, or at least most justified, it would seem able to ground context-independent interpersonal comparisons of meaning in life. In principle, when comparing the meaning in people's lives, the fundamentality theory would direct one to attend to factors that include the following: how many facets of their intelligence that they exercised; how much they did so; how sophisticated the exercise of their intelligence was; how dedicated or effortful they were; how much their intelligence was positively oriented towards a fundamental dimension of human life; how broad the fundamental properties were (viz., those basic to an individual or to a society or to the species); how useful their actions ended up being for these properties; and how much they exhibited narrative values such as improvement, redemption and originality.

Appealing to such elements, one readily detects large gaps between periods of a given life (recall the example of my teenage versus middle aged selves), and also potentially between different lives altogether. Returning to Euclid, Picasso and the second-rate painter, it would *not obviously* be nonsensical or impossible to judge which of the first two had a more meaningful life and by how much. To see whether a precise answer were available would require a thorough survey of all the different elements inherent to the fundamentality theory and their careful application to all the different facets of both lives. That would not be an easy task, but seems to be largely doable in principle.

Of course, it could turn out that the lack of precision about how to balance

various facets of the fundamentality theory means that it would fail to render a precise answer about whose life was more meaningful and to what degree (as well as fail to ground transitivity when it comes to ordering more than two lives). However, it could still ground the conclusion that Euclid and Picasso were “in the same ballpark” so far as amount of meaning goes (cf. Baumann 2015: 36-38), or, to use a metaphor I have used elsewhere about degrees of moral status, were “in the same orbit”, compared to the second-rate painter who is in a different one (Metz 2012: 394-395, 397).⁵

2.4. *Are Any Universal Claims about Life’s Meaning Justified?*

Recall that by a “theory” of meaning in life I mean a basic principle intended to capture what all meaningful conditions of any given human person’s life have in common as distinct from the meaningless ones. Such a principle aims to capture the nature of meaning analogous to the way that H₂O captures the essence of water. One reason to doubt that any such theory is available is that meaning is incomparable, as per the previous sub-section. Another reason for doubt is that, even if the meaning in some people’s lives can be compared, there is little reason to think that one can be justified in making claims about meaning across all people. In their contributions, Sho Yamaguchi and Tartaglia provide reason to think that certain aspects of my methodology undercut my ability to make any justified claims about meaning that apply to everyone, even supposing substantial interpersonal comparison were feasible.

Yamaguchi doubts that I am justified in making any claims about meaning with a universal scope because I usually seek to do so by appealing to intuition (as does Kukita 2015: 213-214). In *Meaning in Life*, I use the term “intuition” to signify a judgment of the degree of meaning in a particular case that is less controversial than the more general principles the judgment is being used to evaluate. The claims that caring for others who are medically vulnerable and making a scientific discovery confer meaning on a life, whereas chewing gum and torturing people for the fun of it fail to do so, are examples of intuitions that I used to evaluate principles, e.g., ones that meaning is merely a function of

⁵ And note that deeming lives to be in the same ballpark with respect to degree of meaning might be enough to continue to think in terms of maximally meaningful lives (albeit not a single maximally meaningful life), a concept that is essential to my account of how to judge whether anyone’s life is meaningful on balance (Metz 2013: 154-158).

satisfying one's strongest desires or consists solely of developing rational natures. Insofar as the principles accord with the intuitions, that is some evidence in the former's favour, and insofar as they fail to do so, that is some evidence against them. Or so I maintain in the book.

However, Yamaguchi maintains that these evidential claims are true only for those who also share my intuitions, which is not everyone. According to him, for any intuition I posit, there will be someone who could have the opposite intuition, meaning that any principle I seek to defend with my intuition will not be justified for such an interlocutor, pulling the rug out from any pretensions I have for the principle's universal validity. As he puts it, "Generally speaking, any argument grounded on some intuitive judgments finally backfires in the sense that its alleged adequacy will be rejected by another argument of the same type" (2015: 76; cf. Tartaglia 2015: 103).

After mounting this argument in a thoughtful and rigorous manner, he maintains that all is not lost for *Meaning in Life*, since its "real worth" (Yamaguchi 2015: 66, 67, 75, 80, 88) lies in its existential, and not theoretical, dimensions. In particular, Yamaguchi suggests that my "intellectual inquiry into life's meaning carries with it an excellence in the sense that it succeeds in encouraging us as his fellows to engage in the same type of inquiry in our ways in turn" (2015: 88).

I of course would like the book to exhibit both kinds of value, and, moreover, to have existential import *because* it is theoretically powerful. As I said in its first few pages, I largely wrote *Meaning in Life* out of the sense that my life would be somewhat more meaningful insofar as I were to make progress towards understanding the nature of meaning (2013: 1-3; see also 13, 249). Although Yamaguchi thinks that the book can have existential significance without having a theoretical one, for me the former depends crucially on the latter.

So, the question becomes whether the appeal to intuition undercuts the project of defending a theory of what constitutes meaning in life that has a universal scope. It had better not, or else an enormous range of philosophical projects are doomed, including theorization about morality, well-being, reference, personal identity, causation and much, much else. As I note in the book, even philosophical theories of justification invariably appeal to intuitions about what is justified and what is not (2013: 8n8). How else is one to evaluate a purportedly maximally general principle except by appeal to what is both more

particular and less controversial than it?

And note that Yamaguchi himself is naturally read as appealing to intuition, not about meaning, but about justification. When he says that someone who has a different intuition about meaning makes my appeal to intuition about meaning unjustified as a way to defend any universally binding claim, he is himself appealing to an *intuition about the nature of justification*. But if intuitions about what is justified or unjustified are philosophically sound, then so are intuitions about what is meaningful or not.

Beyond this dialectical, “partners in guilt” argument against Yamaguchi, I note several reasons to think that Yamaguchi’s intuition about the lack of justification is what is in fact unjustified, not my appeal to intuitions about meaning. First off, it is important to note that it is not relevant merely to point out that someone *says* (Yamaguchi 2015: 75) something counter to an intuition. After all, one could *say* that plants are self-conscious without *thinking* that, where only the latter would be pertinent to ascertaining justified belief.

Furthermore, it is not even relevant merely to note that someone *could judge* (Yamaguchi 2015: 78) something counter to an intuition or that there *might be* such a person (Yamaguchi 2015: 84). A deaf person *could judge* a piece of music not to be beautiful, there *might be* a person on drugs who denies that jumping off a cliff would damage his health, and a layperson *could fail to judge* there to be a proton spiralling off upon a collision of particles in a cloud chamber. However, these *possibilities* would provide no epistemic reason for one who hears to doubt that a piece of music is beautiful, for one who is sober to doubt that health would be risked upon jumping off a cliff, or for a physicist to doubt that there is a proton in the cloud chamber.

At best, the relevant case would be one in which someone *who is competent* to judge issues of meaning in life *actually judges* something contrary to an intuition I posit. Now, is there in fact such a person who *sincerely believes* that taking pleasure in harming other innocent people confers meaning on his life (Yamaguchi 2015: 75-76)? Supposing he understands what talk of “meaning in life” means, it is doubtful; it is more likely that a person would think that his own happiness matters more than meaningfulness than that he would think that meaningfulness is constituted by taking pleasure in harming innocents.

Suppose, however, that Yamaguchi were to succeed in finding someone who truly believes that meaning in his life would be enhanced by taking pleasure in causing others pain. What then?

Here, the deep point in reply would be that I am not seeking to evaluate theories merely on the basis of any intuitions taken as ultimate or fixed. If someone thinks that taking pleasure in harming others is meaningful, then I would seek out some *other*, ideally *stronger* intuitions that he has, and make the case that they support a certain, more general principle (or cluster of them) that gives him reason to *revise* his intuition about harming others.⁶

In short, my epistemic aim is not to find a theory that entails and plausibly explains all extant intuitions of a given interlocutor, but is rather to find one (or a group) that best accounts for intuitions held after the process of reflecting theoretically on them. And since this process, which will take many decades, has begun in earnest only fairly recently amongst philosophers with regard to meaning in life, I remain optimistic about the prospect of convergence.

Finally, note that by “convergence” I do not mean unanimous agreement about a narrowly defined theory. Instead, I mean something like what is sometimes encountered in science, where a very large majority of experts agree that certain theoretical options are plausible or not and such substantial agreement (but not full-blown consensus) is strong evidence for views with a universal scope. Beliefs in phlogiston, a flat earth and the plum pudding model of the atom are false for anyone regardless of when and where she has lived, whereas beliefs in some kind of process of natural selection and some version of quantum mechanics are true for all societies. These judgments of which beliefs are universally true and false are justified by virtue of what most contemporary scientists have come to hold. And I seek out something similar when it comes to beliefs about what is and is not meaningful; here, too, what most systematic enquirers have come to hold about this subject matter could provide strong evidence for claims with a universal scope, e.g., that taking pleasure in causing pain to another innocent person cannot confer meaning on one’s life.

Tartaglia’s major reason for being sceptical about the prospect of being able to justify any universal claims about meaning differs from Yamaguchi’s. According to him, the theory of linguistic reference that I occasionally invoke in the book undercuts the ability to ground any claims about meaning with a universal scope.

This theory is the sort of causal account of reference that Saul Kripke and

⁶ Note that this is how I would also deal with those who are inclined to judge Hitler to have lead a meaningful life, which judgment Tartaglia takes to be evidence of the utter indeterminacy of the analytic approach (2015: 103-104).

Hilary Putnam developed in the context of proper names and mass nouns. Very roughly, on their view, a certain term refers to a particular object or property in the world if someone once dubbed it with the term and others now intend to use the term to pick out the thing initially dubbed. The view naturally underwrites an objective or realist approach to science, as the *nature* of the thing dubbed is mind-independent and something to be discovered over time through empirical means.

A number of philosophers, particularly associated with Cornell, have employed this theory of reference to develop an objective account of morality. For them, a term such as “wrongness” refers to certain kinds of behaviour, where the nature of that behaviour is likewise mind-independent and something to be apprehended through *a posteriori* enquiry. At times in the book, I invoked this kind of approach to make sense of how it might be possible for both morality and meaning to be objective.

Suggesting how morality and meaning plausibly could be objective differs from providing substantial evidence that they are objective in the way I suggest. Tartaglia remarks that I offer “very little in way of justification” (2015: 106; see also Kukita 2015: 213) for the realist views proposed, but that was intentional on my part; as I said in the book, I wanted to avoid complicated metaphysical and meta-ethical debates, so as to focus squarely on meaning (Metz 2013: 7, 22n5, 170, 172; see also 111, 120, 134, 243). I did not mean to suggest that I had provided conclusive reason to accept realist accounts of morality and meaning. Instead, my specific limited aims were, first, to demonstrate how a naturalist might on the face of it be able to account for an invariant morality, i.e., to show that it is not obvious that only God could ground one (2013: 91-96), and, second, to give pause to those who adhere to subjectivism because they cannot see how any sort of objective value would be possible apart from God (2013: 170-172).

Tartaglia maintains that the sort of objectivity that could be grounded by a causal theory of reference is not one that would suit my purposes, which include identifying some claims about meaning that are true for all human persons. If different societies used terms such as “meaningful” to refer to different patterns of behaviour, then, by the causal theory, there would be mind-independent facts about the nature of these patterns, but the patterns would not be uniform across all societies. There would be objectivity but without universality.

Elsewhere, in a debate with Allen Wood, I have myself argued that value realists who seek out claims with a universal scope must address the sort of

possibility that Tartaglia raises (Metz 2007: 369-372). I also spoke of the issue in *Meaning in Life*, in the context of a universal morality (2013: 95). There, I noted that naturalistic moral realists could plausibly draw on sociobiological accounts of the origin moral norms to explain why all human societies would use their respective terms for morality to refer to the same cluster of behavioural properties. The naturalistic realist about meaning who invokes a causal theory of reference owes a similar kind of explanation.

Alas, I lack a convincing one at present; however, one might readily emerge from my theoretical account of the nature of meaning. If I am correct that great meaning, i.e., that which warrants substantial pride and admiration, comes from positive engagement with the fundamental conditions of human life, i.e., conditions responsible for much else about major dimensions of human existence, such as reasoning and relating, then it is reasonable to suspect that meaning-talk in all human societies would refer to such properties; for if it referred to something other than these properties, humans would have been much less likely to maintain themselves over time. I suggested this sort of strategy in the final chapter of the book: “What would have facilitated survival and flourishing are judging behaviour to be worthy of great esteem insofar as it exhibited, roughly, respect for reasoning and sharing and judging behaviour to be worthy of great shame to the extent that it has been degrading of the fundamental conditions of human life” (Metz 2013: 244).

3. Giving Supernaturalism Its Due

Although I am a naturalist about what makes life meaningful, I take supernaturalism, the view that a spiritual dimension is necessary for life to be meaningful, seriously, and aimed in the book to give it a fair shake. The entire second (and longest) part of *Meaning in Life* is devoted to critically exploring God-based and soul-based accounts of what constitutes meaning in life. In 3.1 below, I consider the view that in the book I missed an important rationale for thinking that life would be meaningless without immortality, perhaps of an ensouled kind. In 3.2, I address objections to my argument against the view that God’s *purpose* could constitute meaning since that view fails to cohere with the best rationale for thinking that God alone could do so. Finally, in 3.3 I respond to criticisms of my argument against any supernaturalism about meaning, according to which adherents to it typically exhibit incoherent beliefs in doing

so.

3.1. How Might Death Undercut Meaning in Life?

In *Meaning in Life*, I sought to unify all the major arguments for thinking that immortality is necessary for meaning in life, at least insofar as they are fairly promising. Specifically, I contended that they ultimately rely on what I called the “perfection thesis”, the claim that engagement with a maximally conceivable (or possible) value is necessary for a life to be meaningful. For example, the suggestion that life would be meaningless insofar as the wicked were to flourish and the upright were to suffer rests upon the claim that ideal justice is necessary for meaning. Similarly, the idea that one’s life would be meaningless if one were not to enjoy God forever in Heaven supposes that a perfect being is essential.

Fumitake Yoshizawa contends that there is another *prima facie* strong argument for an immortality requirement for life’s meaning that I did not address and that does not appear to depend on the perfection thesis. He maintains that one might be motivated to hold the immortality requirement, not because one seeks a perfect value in an eternal afterlife, but rather because one wants an imperfect value not to end. And he thinks this is in fact the best way to understand Tolstoy, who “finds that all valuable things for him will be ‘lost’ because they will die or disappear. And because of this fact, he feels sorrow and loses his zest for life. Then, he claims that his life is meaningless” (Yoshizawa 2015: 144).

I find insightful Yoshizawa’s suggestions, first, that there is a difference between thinking that life would be meaningless in the absence of a perfect value and thinking that it would be so if an imperfect value were to become absent, and, second, that the latter view is worth taking seriously. Although he ultimately rejects the latter rationale for an immortality requirement as unsound, Yoshizawa’s central point is that I cannot claim to have provided a thorough rejection of it merely by having argued against the perfection thesis.

There are occasions when Yoshizawa phrases his argument in a way that begs the question against the friend of the immortality requirement. Consider this remark: “Metz interprets immortality as a condition for *obtaining meaning*, but in view of the idea that I present, immortality means the *negation of the death* of a person whose life *already has meaning*” (2015: 134). To say that what

is problematic about death is that it ends a *meaningful* life implies that meaning is possible without immortality, which is exactly what the friend of the immortality requirement denies.

So, to express the point in a way that would be useful to the adherent to the immortality requirement, I suspect one ought to say something like this: life is meaningless if and because certain, imperfect activities, relationships or states come to an end. Or as Yoshizawa aptly says elsewhere, “immortality can mean simply retaining the existence of things with their usual earthly value” (2015: 139).

I wonder, though, whether things would in fact retain their “usual earthly value” if they never came to an end. A love that lasts forever and an object that merits intellectual contemplation for an eternity seem naturally described as “perfect” or “ideal”. Yoshizawa is aiming to present “at least one understanding of immortality in which the amount of value is not important” (2015: 139), but one might reasonably doubt that he has succeeded.

In reply, Yoshizawa could try to argue that, even if a value that lasted forever would indeed be perfect, it would not be the *perfection* that would best explain why death would plausibly make meaning impossible. There is logical space for Yoshizawa to make such a move. But is it attractive space? I am afraid that I find it difficult to suggest what else might do the explanatory work. To think that one’s loving relationships will end, and indeed that one’s beloveds will die, and that these facts entail that love fails to confer meaning on one’s life seems best explained by the idea that the love is imperfect.

3.2. Could God’s Purpose Be the Source of Life’s Meaning?

I appreciate the power of the claim that life’s meaning is captured by fulfilling a purpose that God, as understood in the monotheist tradition, has assigned us.⁷ Where does the higher value of meaning in life come from, a value that transcends our physical capacity for pleasure? From a holy being who is in a spiritual realm. Why is God necessary for meaning in life? Because without God having commanded to us to do some things rather than others, there would be no invariant moral rules, or other kinds of objective value, by which to abide. What explains the different degrees of meaning in people’s lives? Some

⁷ The rest of this paragraph is pinched from Metz (2016b).

have lived up to God's commands better than others. What accounts for the significance of Nelson Mandela's and Mother Teresa's lives in comparison to the relative insignificance of a serial killer's? The former have done much more to fulfil God's commands than has the latter.

However, in *Meaning in Life* I ultimately argue against this particular God-based theory of meaning in life. In a nutshell, my reasoning is that for God to be necessary for any significance in our lives, He must have certain qualities that cannot exist in the natural world, these qualities must be qualitatively superior to any goods possible in a physical universe, and they must be what ground meaning in it. I take a cue from one major strand of perfect being theology and propose that, if a God-based theory were true, it would have to be so because meaning depends on the existence of a perfect being, where perfection requires properties such as atemporal, simple and immutable personhood, which is possible only in a spiritual realm. And then I also take a cue from oft-expressed concerns about conflict between God's otherness and God's personality, and note that a perfect being, so conceived, appears to be incapable of being purposive. If meaning must come from God, it probably will not by virtue of fulfilling a purpose He has assigned us (but rather, I suggest, from a mutually loving relationship between us and God).

Jason Poettcker carefully and accurately recounts this dialectic, and provides reason to doubt the two most crucial steps in it. In particular, he maintains that the best explanation of why God might be necessary for meaning does not imply that God is simple, atemporal or immutable, in the ways I conceive these properties, and that, even if it did, God could still be purposive.

Regarding the latter issue, Poettcker remarks, "There is also a large body of literature on God's relation to time that Metz utterly fails to engage.... To be fair, Metz does acknowledge that these responses are out there, but he does not engage with them" (2015: 190, 192). I did not in the book aim to provide conclusive reason that God's simplicity and atemporality (for instance) would be logically incompatible with purposiveness. I am not a metaphysician, and wanted to avoid intricate debates in metaphysics as much as I could, so as to focus on meaning (2013: 111, 120, 134, 243). So, I drew upon traditional concerns in the literature about how a radically other God could interact us in ways that adherents to a purpose theory normally conceive, presenting a challenge to the latter to show either that purposiveness can cohere with simplicity and atemporality, or that God need not have such properties in order

to ground meaning. I aimed to provide a new problem for purpose theory, “the most significant” one (2013: 113) that would provide reason to consider alternative God-based theories (2013: 118), and did not assert, or mean to suggest, that it could not be resolved in the end.

That said, my concerns are not allayed by the sketches Poettcker has provided about how a simple and atemporal God might be able to assign us a purpose. Quoting Augustine who claims that God is the source of time, Poettcker says, “If God created time then it would not make sense to say that God’s decision to create took time. Metz assumes that time would have to exist before God created and that creation implies temporality, but these assumptions are not adequately supported” (2015: 191). But the “assumptions” are ones of definitional analysis. Creating by definition appears to be an event, and an event is essentially, if not also by definition, something that takes time. And so I believe the burden is on the purpose theorist to explain how an atemporal being could do something that takes time, indeed, how one could *create* time in the first place (and not merely *our* time, as per Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, whom Poettcker cites).

Poettcker is correct that I have not shown that attempts from the likes of, say, William Lane Craig fail, but the main point of my argument was that such attempts need to be thoroughly considered by others who wish to defend the purpose theory. I above all wanted to make the case that such a metaphysical problem has an important bearing on issues of meaning, requires a solution that appears difficult to devise, and makes it reasonable to explore non-purposive alternatives by those inclined to think that God grounds meaning in life.

Turning to the other major step, Poettcker also maintains that the purpose theorist ultimately need not show that purposiveness and simplicity/atemporality are compatible, since God could ground meaning without exhibiting the latter properties. Here, again, I did not mean to suggest that I had provided conclusive reason to maintain that only a simple/atemporal God could ground meaning; my claim was that such a rationale for deeming God to be necessary for meaning is, for all I can tell, “more auspicious” and “more promising” than other rationales (2013: 110, 112, 120).

And I continue to think that in light of Poettcker’s alternative suggestions in his article. He mentions two that appear to be logically distinct (but that could be conjoined). On the one hand, he maintains that God would be a person who *necessarily* has the properties of being powerful, knowledgeable and good

(presumably to a maximal degree), whereas anything in nature would have these merely accidentally. “Even if we could find instances of goodness, knowledge and power in nature, this would not mean that nature is sufficient for meaning if meaning in life requires having these qualities *essentially*” (Poettcker 2015: 190).

This is an indeed a position that I did not consider in the book, and I value Poettcker’s having advanced it. The key issue is whether essentially exhibiting the three classic values is enough to explain why only God could ground meaning, even granting, for now, that only God could essentially exhibit them. Imagine, now, a physical person who accidentally exhibited goodness, knowledge and power, but did so to a superlative degree. By the logic of Poettcker’s suggestion, *no* meaning could come from orienting one’s life towards such a being. I find more plausible the idea that some meaning could come from doing so, even if *more* would come from orienting one’s life around God.

Poettcker’s other basic suggestion about why God alone could make our lives meaningful is more familiar, and, from my perspective, less promising. It is that objective value, one that applies to all human beings independent of their mental states, could come only from God. As he puts it,

The good, true, and beautiful do not have the kind of final value that Metz argues they do, if they are grounded in nature. Value requires a value giver and nature cannot give objective value.... (H)umans cannot maintain or sustain the objective value of anything because they are contingent, finite, mutable beings.... God is the only being that can give things objective value.... (I)f God did not exist, and did not give one a purpose, anything else that one directed one’s life toward would not be have final or objective value and thus one’s life would be meaningless (2015: 200, 201).

I addressed this meta-ethical theory not in the chapter addressing arguments against purpose theory, on which Poettcker focuses (2013: 98-118), but rather in the chapter that critically discusses arguments for it (2013: 77-97).

In particular, I addressed John Cottingham’s argumentation for thinking that only God could ground objective value and hence meaning. I argued that he, along with most of those who advance such a view, evince an incoherence in

their beliefs, since they claim to know that there is objective value but do not claim to know that God exists, even if they have *faith* that He does (and I also sketched a way that nature plausibly could ground objective value). Since Poettcker does not take up that rationale, I leave the debate with him here, but move on to Nicholas Waghorn, who has thoroughly taken it up.

3.3. *Can Supernaturalists Avoid Incoherent Beliefs?*

In *Meaning in Life* I sought to provide a new argument that would provide a large majority of who (are inclined to) hold supernaturalism reason not to do so. According to the core of this argument, there is a logical inconsistency in holding the following three views: (1) I know “If X, then Y” is true; (2) I know X obtains; (3) I do not know whether Y obtains. Call these “the three claims”.

Now, I maintain that most supernaturalists would be committed to an instantiation of the three claims. Specifically, for a majority of those who claim to know that supernaturalism is true, it would be the case that they would then hold the following version of the three claims: (1*) I know “If meaning exists, then God exists” is true; (2*) I know meaning exists; (3*) I do not know whether God exists. And I suggest that they ought to drop (1*), the God-based theory of life’s meaning, since (2*) and (3*) are much more defensible.

(1*) is the claim that one has enough epistemic reason for knowledge (which I called “conclusive reason” in the book) of a God-based theory of meaning in life. (2*) is the default position of most philosophers, including supernaturalists, working in the field of meaning in life; a large majority reject nihilism when it comes to meaning in individual lives and for what they think is conclusive reason (even if many deny that the human race as a whole has a meaning in relation to something beyond it). And (3*) is the idea that, even if one has faith in God, or *some* epistemic reason to believe in Him, it is extremely difficult to maintain that one has enough (“conclusive”) epistemic reason for knowledge⁸ of His existence; many religious believers, even philosophical ones, deny that they know God exists.

In the book, I argued that Cottingham, the field’s current most prominent and careful God-based theorist, expresses commitment to all three of these claims,

⁸ By “conclusive” evidence I did not mean infallible warrant, as Waghorn suspects (2015: 153-157); I meant merely that the evidence is weighty enough for knowledge, which is the way I took Cottingham to use the term.

and I suggested that most other God-based theorists are implicitly committed to them. I also generalized the argument to soul-based theories; here, too, few do (or reasonably can) claim knowledge that a soul exists, but they do claim to know that meaning exists, making it incoherent to claim to know that if meaning exists, then a soul exists.

Unfortunately, those whom I know have spent the most time considering this incoherence objection to supernaturalism, including Waghorn,⁹ have misinterpreted it, in two major ways. There are similarities between the objection and other, prominent forms of philosophical thought, and in *Meaning in Life* I did not take the time to forestall conflation between them. In the following, I work above all to clarify the nature of my objection, and to urge others to confuse it with neither the view that supernaturalists (or naturalists) are intending to advance an inference with the three claims, nor the view that epistemic closure is essentially at stake with my analysis of them.

First, Waghorn and others have thought that I understand various participants in the debate about the nature of meaning to be advancing an inference via the three claims. For example, Waghorn says, “I take the thrust of Metz’ argument to be that the evidence for wrongness and for Cottingham’s conditional *transmits* warrant, and hence (I am assuming here) justification, to the proposition that God exists” (2015: 152; see also 156, 158-159, 162).

But that is not, as I understand it, the thrust of my argument. I do not read Cottingham as offering an inference for the conclusion that God exists. The point of my argument is that Cottingham *denies* he can provide any inference that would underwrite knowledge of God’s existence (and that many other supernaturalists would follow suit)! And, further, that this denial is incoherent upon claiming to know that meaning exists and that the existence of meaning implies God’s existence (and, finally, that one should therefore give up claiming to know the latter). My contention is that Cottingham and others accept the three claims, which are logically inconsistent, not that he invokes the three claims as a collection to draw a conclusion.

Relatedly, Waghorn misinterprets my claim that a naturalist approach to meaning avoids incoherence. Speaking of me, Waghorn says, “I take him here to mean that his position satisfies (A*), as he knows that morality exists, he knows that morality is a function of natural properties, and so he knows what this

⁹ As well as Jessica Lerm in correspondence and Tom Angier in a talk given at a launch of *Meaning in Life*.

entails: that there are natural properties” (2015: 156). But this is not what I mean. I am not seeking to infer that there are natural properties. Instead, I am contending that a naturalist instantiation of the three claims is not logically inconsistent. One might well not know that a naturalist theory of meaning is true, but if one were to assert knowledge of it, one would not contradict other claims one would be inclined to make, viz., that meaning exists and natural properties exist.

Second, I do not take myself to be invoking any principle of epistemic closure, let alone of epistemic transmission (as per Waghorn 2015: 152). These principles assert that one knows something, upon (or in virtue of) knowing something else. Along these lines, Waghorn ascribes the following principle to me, and bases the rest of his critical discussion on it: “If I know that X obtains, and I know that ‘If X, then Y’ is true, then I know that Y” (2015: 151).

However, I never spoke of such a principle, with Waghorn acknowledging that he has “reconstructed” it in light of my comments (2015: 151n1), and I did not intend anything like what the principle says. My point is not that supernaturalists are committed to knowing something, upon knowing something else, whereas in fact, according to me, they do not know. It is rather that supernaturalists *themselves often enough claim not to know that God exists* (patent in Cottingham’s case), which is inconsistent when conjoined with the claims to know both that supernaturalism is true and that some lives are meaningful, which supernaturalists also often enough hold. To avoid the inconsistency, I maintain, they ought to drop adherence to supernaturalism, while retaining their scepticism about God’s existence and their confidence in the existence of meaning in life.

Perhaps principles of closure and transmission lurk implicitly in the incoherence objection, as articulated above, which would license the intricate and deep explorations of them in Waghorn’s article. At this stage, however, I do not see that I am committed to them.

Some of Waghorn’s discussion is still relevant, despite my intentions not having been clear. In one place, for example, Waghorn suggests that Cottingham could avoid incoherence by denying to know that if meaning exists, then God exists: “(H)e does not think he *knows* the conditional, he merely takes a weaker attitude toward it, like holding it to be true, or having a certain degree of justified belief in it (this is suggested by Cottingham’s claim that he ‘maintains’ the conditional, rather than ‘knows’ it)” (2015: 153).

Waghorn acknowledges the implication of this move: “Cottingham must accept that his arguments for a supernaturalist theory of life’s meaning do not conclusively refute alternate views” (2015: 153). Waghorn thinks that Cottingham might be satisfied with such a position, but I do not think he, or supernaturalists generally, should be. As the field stands, it is hard to believe that a new argument would come on the scene to provide evidence of God’s existence sufficient for knowledge. Similarly, it is hard to believe that those working in the field of meaning in life would encounter a consideration that would lead them to deny that the Einsteins and Mandelas of the world have had such a value in their lives. That means that, if there is indeed an incoherence, supernaturalism has virtually no prospect of being known. It is not merely that we lack conclusive evidence for it now; it is that, for all we can tell, the prospect of encountering that kind of evidence is slim.

At another place, Waghorn considers the possibility of avoiding the incoherence in the way that Roger Crisp once suggested in correspondence with me (cf. 2013: 97n17), namely, by *now* claiming to know that God exists, precisely in light of knowing that a God-based account of meaning is true and that meaning exists. In reply to Crisp, I said that such a move is unpromising, since it is the God-based account of meaning that is in question. It is a highly contested theory in need of argumentation, not a stable premise to be used to draw a conclusion about the existence of God. And to this reply, Waghorn has two interesting responses.

First, Waghorn remarks that “surely whether we are unsure of the conditional claim is not a problem for *Cottingham*, as, on Metz’ interpretation, the former does take himself to know this” (2015: 160). But it remains a problem for Cottingham in particular since he also takes himself not to know that God exists. According to his concluding summary of arguments for and against theism, Cottingham says, “the evidence from the observable world was at best compatible with a claim about its ultimate divine source: although not ruling it out, it was not such as to support it either” (2003: 92; see also Cottingham 2005: 6-8, 13, 24-25, 47-48, 57-58, 61-62, 118-119, 122-124, 133). His commitment to the Pascalian tradition is strong; belief in God for epistemic reason is not, nor is ever likely to be, prescribed, but pragmatic considerations recommend such belief. It is unlikely that Cottingham would all of a sudden proclaim knowledge of God in light of the argument Waghorn and Crisp suggest on his behalf.

But should he? Waghorn's second response is that "Cottingham has given us arguments to *establish* that we know this conditional, and so it may be unjustified to be unsure of the claim, depending on how successful those arguments are" (2015: 160). Waghorn is correct that Cottingham has aimed to (or is plausibly reading as having aimed to) provide conclusive evidence of a God-based theory of meaning, one that implies that if meaning exists, then God exists. And so it is apt for Waghorn to point out that, if choosing with thoroughness which of the three claims to let go of, one ought to examine all the evidence for and against each of them.

As things stand amongst most contemporary philosophers working in the analytic tradition, objective value need not have its source in God, as per Cottingham's central argument for a God-based theory of meaning, and God's existence looks doubtful in light of the problem of evil and inability to figure into the best explanation of comparatively uncontested data. However, there of course remains debate about these matters, which involves metaphysics, meta-ethics, epistemology and the philosophy of language, all of which were well beyond the scope of *Meaning in Life*, and probably remain beyond the scope of my lifetime. Waghorn is of course correct that such investigations "cannot be postponed indefinitely" (2015: 159n18) if the debate about naturalism and supernaturalism is to be taken further, but that is a project for the field more broadly, not for me. I would be content to have shown that Cottingham and other supernaturalists must choose between the three claims of knowing that if meaning exists, God exists, knowing that meaning exists, and not knowing that God exists, and to have noted that, on balance at the moment, philosophical opinion counsels letting go of the first claim.

4. Capturing Naturalism

Here I address the contributors insofar as they have provided some reason to doubt my favoured naturalist theory of what can make a life meaningful. According to it, one's life can be meaningful in a purely physical universe if (roughly) one contours one's intelligence (of which one kind is emotional) towards conditions fundamental to human life. For conditions to be fundamental is for them to account for much else of a certain human domain, e.g., for much of the course of a particular person's life or of the way that the human species has developed. In the first two subsections, I take up objections that basically

apply to my conception of contouring intelligence. Specifically, in 4.1 I tackle the claim, inspired by a reading of Buddhism, that the highest meaning would not involve a deliberate striving towards a certain, meaningful state of affairs, which contrasts with the usual way that I characterize contouring, and in 4.2 I respond to the argument that I have not provided enough justification to believe that contouring is best understood as non-consequentialist. In 4.3, I reply to objections that fundamentality is not the relevant object towards which to contour one's intelligence (supposing one should).

4.1. Is Great Meaning Compatible with Striving?

So far as I have been able to tell, use of terms such as “meaningful”, “significant” and the like are fairly peculiar to Western societies. High praise for a life in other cultures such as the African and the East Asian tends rather to invoke terms such as “wise”, “excellent” or “virtuous”. Despite the differences in terminology, there is plausibly overlap conceptually. What both kinds of talk probably connote are ways of living that merit substantial esteem or admiration or that achieve purposes much higher than those relating to one's animal self. This conceptual common ground makes it apt to engage in cross-cultural comparison and evaluation.

Christopher Ketcham discusses one major strain of Buddhism in light of the views salient in *Meaning in Life*, especially comparing and contrasting it with my favoured theory of life's meaning in terms of contouring one's intelligence towards fundamental conditions of human life. According to Ketcham, there is a type of meaning that early Buddhism rates most highly but that the fundamentality theory fails to capture, a fascinating point that he makes with care. Yu Urata makes a similar point more briefly by invoking the importance of what he calls “trans-meaning” in the context of Zen Buddhism.

Taking up Ketcham first, he describes two different ways of living, a pre-enlightenment state and a state of enlightenment. A pre-enlightenment state is essentially one in which a person is aware of herself and, especially, what she lacks. It is a state in which one is “clinging, grasping, craving ultimately for more life” (Ketcham 2015: 118), but also for, say, more meaning in life. Consequent to such attachment for something one does not have is suffering or dissatisfaction.

Applying meaning-talk to Buddhism, Ketcham maintains that some meaning

is available to those in a pre-enlightenment state, and he is inclined to identify much of it with what the fundamentality theory picks out. Specifically, he maintains that the “Eightfold Path” towards enlightenment is fairly well captured by contouring one’s intelligence towards what is basic to human life. Ketcham remarks, “Fundamentality theory emphasizes cognitive reorientation (mindfulness), logical decision making (wisdom), and positive orientation to the fundamentals of human existence (ethical thoughts; ethical acts). In this both theories appear to agree” (2015: 121).

Although not all pre-enlightenment lives are equal from the standpoint of meaning, for Ketcham’s interpretation of Buddhism, none of them can achieve the ultimate kind of meaning, which is available only to one who has become enlightened. An enlightened person is one who no longer has the “desire to possess, and to cling to being and further becoming” (Ketcham 2015: 113). A person in such a state does not seek out meaning for herself, and is not one who has collected a great amount of meaning in a pre-enlightenment state. Instead, she exhibits “the most wondrous idea of meaning of all” (Ketcham 2015: 132) in virtue of having transcended concern for her self and instead being focused on others. The enlightened one is “no longer concerned with his or her own meaning derived from the ethical state of *nibbāna*, only in acting in ways that produce meaning for others” (Ketcham 2015: 132). And so follows the title of Ketcham’s article, “Meaning without Ego”.

Ketcham usually interprets such as a state naturalistically, i.e., as an other-regarding orientation that is neither “extra-physical” (2015: 123) nor “transcendental” (2015: 118-119), but instead is “purely and solely an ethical state” (2015: 118n22). The enlightened person “still lives in this world, but this is a person who has shorn the shackles of the need for being and becoming and has ended for himself/herself the unsatisfactory desire for rebirth” (2015: 123).

Turning, now, to Urata, he surveys a wide array of literature in the field of psychology, both Western and Japanese, and compares it with key distinctions drawn in *Meaning in Life*. Many of the distinctions found in the psychological literature, as Urata conveys it, line up nicely with philosophical ones discussed in my book, as he points out. He also presents many of these distinctions pictorially, in an insightful, revealing way that highlights their relationships and prompts reflection (2015: 221).¹⁰

¹⁰ For example, I wonder where a loner who tends his own garden, or a person who writes poems that she does not share with others, would fit in his schema.

Urata rightly notes that I do not use images to convey any ideas, making that one point of difference between our work. In addition, as a psychologist he says that he works with people's reports of their experiences and perspectives, largely "accepting" them and then working with them to obtain greater meaning, a practical standpoint that also differs from my approach. These two differences do not indicate any deep incompatibilities, unlike a potential third difference Urata notes, which concerns what he calls "trans-meaning", short for meaning that has a transcendental dimension (2015: 222). Quoting another scholar, Urata says that it goes beyond plain meaning and consists of "the way of living where he or she transcends the dual view of meaning or no meaning, and does not quest for 'why'" (2015: 220), and in a note he indicates that it is an orientation prominent in Western mysticism and Zen Buddhism (2015: 220n4; see also 223).

Urata's description of someone who no longer asks "Why?" because she has gone beyond the categories of meaning is similar to Ketcham's description of an enlightened person. Both scholars ascribe to Buddhism the view that an ultimately meaningful state of awareness is one that no longer thinks in terms of meaningfulness or the lack of it.

In the following, I do not question this interpretation of Buddhism,¹¹ instead considering whether it is truly something at odds with the fundamentality theory. Note that it is not essential to the fundamentality theory, or indeed most naturalist accounts of meaning in the Anglo-American tradition, that an agent seek out meaning *qua* meaning. The thought is not that, in order to live a meaningful life, one must think in terms of what would make it fall under the description "meaningful". Instead, one simply ought to act in certain ways that are constitutive of meaning, regardless of whether one employs the concept.

Ketcham and Urata have a deeper point to make, here, however, which is that even if the fundamentality theory does not require a focus on the lack of meaning in one's life, it does permit it, which is incompatible with a state of enlightenment. Ketcham says that "the difference between Metz's fundamentality theory and early Buddhist thinking is that in this ethical state of otherwise than being, 'meaning in life' is no longer an issue, and its

¹¹ Though I detect some tensions in Ketcham's reading of the tradition. For instance, sometimes he says that an enlightened person is not merely one who no longer craves to be reborn, but one who has escaped an actual cycle of rebirth that was influenced by *karma* (2015: 125; see also 115). This suggests that an enlightened person has a spiritual nature that had been reincarnated but no longer will be, which is hard to reconcile with Ketcham's repudiation of the "extra-physical".

measurement, and accumulation, is no longer an issue” (2015: 131).

Perhaps, though, one could understand the fundamentality theory to imply that, in order to obtain superlative meaning, a person must be utterly absorbed by the relevant object, as opposed to be aware of herself and the meaning she would accrue upon engaging with it in the right way. Such would plausibly count as an intense kind of “contouring” or “positive orientation” of one’s intelligence towards fundamentality, e.g., another person’s character in the case of love. Western people often deem the most meaningful times in their lives to be ones in which they are unaware of themselves or are “experiencing flow”, and so there seems to be interesting convergence here with a Buddhist approach.

However, there is a key respect in which the fundamentality theory and Buddhism, or at least some facets of Ketcham’s reading of it, do seem incompatible. Even if a person need not, and should not, strive for more meaning *qua* meaning in her life in order to exhibit the superlative sort, she would by the fundamentality theory still often need to *strive for something*. Consider those who *struggle* against injustice, for example. Here, there is plausibly still a kind of desire or craving for a state in which, roughly, people’s reasoning and relating is not oppressed, exploited or neglected.

I am not sure what Ketcham would say about this point. Sometimes it appears that, for him or for Buddhism, enlightenment means not striving for something *for oneself*, but other times it seems that enlightenment means *not striving*, period. Evidence of the latter in Ketcham’s article is the point that striving of any kind brings with it dissatisfaction and suffering, where it appears that the latter conditions are what the enlightened person ultimately overcomes (2015: 114-117). It is hard for me to see how this approach can be reconciled with Ketcham’s description of the enlightened person as one who acts only “in ways that produce meaning for others”; for surely such action would involve striving and hence frustration, disappointment and loss.

The difficulty I am raising is one that I have had for a long time in trying to understand Buddhism. On the one hand, Buddhism is often understood to recommend that one become the sort of person who is not attached to anything in this impermanent, changing and uncontrollable world, so as to avoid negative feelings and emotions. On the other hand, Buddhism is often understood to recommend that one love, or otherwise act for the sake of, others, which appears to mean being precisely so attached and hence vulnerable to such negative states. It is a tension I see not merely in Ketcham’s article, but in the tradition more

generally.

I could well be misunderstanding the religion, and I would welcome clarity about it from those better informed than I. However, insofar as the tension is real in it, I favour some attachment that is other-directed and even some negative emotional states, say, ones in which one hates injustice or is upset at the loss of a loved one (Metz 2013: 142, 183, 220, 233-234; cf. Metz 2014c: 227-228, 230). Otherwise, the religion appears to me to be overly concerned with a person's own happiness, at the expense of her meaning in life.

4.2. Is Meaning Consequentialist?

Some carefully developed theories of life's meaning in the Anglo-American tradition are naturally described as "consequentialist", as their structure mirrors what that tradition labels "consequentialism" when it comes to theories of morally right action. Just as utilitarians about morality often contend that right acts are those that maximize the long-term net balance of well-being over woe in the world, so utilitarians about meaning, such as Peter Singer, have held the same (or something similar, to the effect that maximal meaning would come from such behaviour). And just as perfectionists about morality often contend that right acts are those that maximally promote the amount of excellence in the universe in the long run (perhaps constrained by rights), so perfectionists about meaning, such as Quentin Smith, have held the same. In my book, I objected to these kinds of consequentialism about meaning and those with similar, teleological accounts of how to engage with final value.

Mark Wells points out that the kinds of consequentialism that I targeted are not representative of all possible forms. In fact, he contends that there are some versions of consequentialism that can avoid the counterexamples I made to the standard forms of utilitarianism and perfectionism, so that I have not provided enough reason to doubt consequentialism as such.

Contra my claim that the kind of action one performs can be constitutive of meaning apart from the results it produces, Wells maintains that a consequentialist could deem the action to be a final value to be promoted. Against my contention that where final value is produced can be constitutive of meaning, Wells argues that a consequentialist can assign weight to the distribution of final value. And in contrast to my claim that one's attitude towards final value can be constitutive of meaning, Wells contends that such it is

open to a consequentialist to maintain that such an attitude can itself be a second-order sort of final value. Wells is correct that these kinds of moves have been made in the moral sphere, and so it is reasonable for him to maintain that they are similarly available when it comes to life's meaning.

However, Wells makes the further, bold claim that for any putatively non-consequentialist point about meaning that I might posit, the consequentialist can find a way to interpret it in consequentialist terms (2015: 176-178). He says, "While particular consequentialist theories remain susceptible to such counter-examples, there will always be some consequentialist theory that avoids the counter-example and thereby remains extensionally adequate" (2015: 177). I do not know whether that is true, but let us suppose that such a "gimmicky" approach is indeed available, to use Nozick's fine term (1974: 29; cf. Nozick 1981: 684n21).

Then, I submit that the non-consequentialist would have in fact won the debate! To see why the debate would be over at precisely that point, consider the moral realm first. There, the issue is what a sheriff should do if, by framing and killing one innocent person, he could thereby prevent the killings of several more innocent people, or about whether a doctor should kill one innocent patient if necessary to harvest his organs and thereby save the lives of four other innocents who would die without them. Standard forms of moral consequentialism appear to entail that it would be right to kill one in these cases.

In reply, some moral consequentialists argue that the consequences are under-described, and in fact are plausibly expected to be worse should the one be killed, making it wrong. Others bite the bullet, maintaining that it would indeed be right to kill the one, in light of a powerful teleological theory of practical reason. The terms "consequentialist" and "non-consequentialist" (or "deontologist") are aptly used to structure this debate about how to act. Although there might in principle be some idiosyncratic moral theory grounded upon precepts that inform standard consequentialism that generates the same outcome as what we call "deontology", that would not be central (I do not suggest it would be downright irrelevant), since there would be zero disagreement about which choices are the right ones to make.

I suggest something similar about meaning, where much of the issue (though not all, on which see 2.1 above) is about how to live. Is there more meaning in a life that promotes a cause by working hard for it than by merely writing a cheque? Is there more meaning in a life that is, in Susan Wolf's influential terms,

“subjectively attracted” to a worthwhile project than one that were instead bored by it? It is these kinds of questions to which most theorists and of course nearly all interested laypeople want answers; they want to know whether meaning is available to them and how to impart it to their lives. And so “consequentialism” and “non-consequentialism/deontology” are aptly used to structure debate about that.

At one point Wells remarks, “The central problem remains that Metz fails to motivate his characterization of what it means for a theory to be consequentialist” (2015: 172). Implicit in the book was my view that taxonomy should be a function of what helps to organize debate about the most important issues. I take them to be about how one can live a life that has more meaning in it as opposed to less, whereas Wells instead is interested in abstract points about whether certain theoretical prescriptions are extensionally equivalent.

For all Wells has said, he has not yet provided any reason to doubt that meaning is adequately captured by the fundamentality theory. Even if some other theory could generate the same conclusions as it, and even if, as he points out, there would in principle be a way to choose between them on explanatory grounds (2015: 177), as things stand, his article does not require me to change anything; for he has not, as yet, suggested that a gimmicky consequentialism would offer an explanation that plausibly rivals the deontological fundamentality theory. Presumably it would not, if it is disconnected from the kind of perspectives that were invoked to question the standard, utilitarian and perfectionist forms of consequentialism.

4.3. Is Meaning Essentially Fundamental?

In his intricate contribution, David Matheson, like me (2013: 212, 219, 226, 230-231), runs with the suggestive characterizations of meaningfulness as a “deep” or “profound” value that contrasts with more shallow, superficial ones. In my work, I do so by appealing to fundamentality, the idea that substantial meaning comes from positively orienting one’s rational nature towards causally or explanatorily deep conditions of human life, roughly, those that account for much else about certain, major dimensions of it. Interestingly, Matheson believes that the spatial metaphor of depth (or, conversely, height as per Mintoff 2008: 81) in fact tells against my fundamentality theory. For him, meaning is deep insofar as it is essentially what he calls “extra-dimensional”, i.e., includes

some other value while expanding the amount of value overall, a property for which my theory fails to account. In the following, after I try to clarify these extremely abstract statements of extra-dimensionality and fundamentality, I mainly argue, *contra* Matheson, that meaning is not invariably extra-dimensional, which is a good thing, since I provide even more reason than he has to think that fundamentality cannot entail that it is.

According to Matheson, for meaning to be an extra-dimensional value means that it is essentially a good that (1) supervenes on (or is constituted by) another, logically distinct final good and that (2), upon doing so, realizes more final goodness on balance. For example, making a strenuous effort to help others and succeeding in making their lives go better is (1*) to exhibit moral worth but (2*) of a special sort where the value of meaning is present beyond that of morality. For another example, being the first to create a new type of poem would be (1#) to exhibit aesthetic value but (2#) of a special sort where the value of meaning is present beyond that of the artwork. Matheson provides several examples where intuitively meaningful conditions do exhibit these two properties, and so it makes sense for him to generalize, i.e., to posit the hypothesis that meaning always exhibits them.

Matheson has two additional reasons for contending that meaning is essentially extra-dimensional. One is that if it were, then he would have cashed out the spatial metaphor routinely associated with meaning-talk, viz., it would count as a “deep” value for being one that enriches some other value, for taking some other value deeper. Another is that extra-dimensionality would best explain the crises of meaning that people sometimes have. Even when their lives exhibit final values such as morality, enquiry and creativity (“the good, the true and the beautiful”), they can sensibly doubt whether they are worthwhile when the extra-ordinary value provided by meaning is lacking, or perceived to be.

Before considering whether my fundamentality theory of what makes a life (notably) meaningful can capture extra-dimensionality, I first provide reason to doubt that it should have to do so. While meaning often exhibits extra-dimensionality, it does not always, or so the following cases suggest. They are intended to be cases where there is plausibly meaning that does not involve “the realization to a certain degree of at least one of the more familiar forms of final value” (Matheson 2015: 21).

First off, consider a young person struck and killed by a drunk driver. Afterwards, her family puts signs up at the scene of the accident to warn people

that drunk driving kills, and more generally engages in activism by appeal to her death. Here, it is plausible to think that her death was not utterly pointless or that her life has had some real significance despite its brevity, at least supposing drunk driving is reduced as a result of her parents' efforts. However, it is implausible to characterize the meaning here in terms of moral value, or any other final good. To be sure, her parents have exhibited moral value, but she did not in virtue of her early death, and yet (some of) the meaning has accrued to her.

For a second case, think about grand master chess players (cf. Metz 2013: 165, 216, 223). It would be reasonable for one to deem one's life to be meaningful for having become a worldwide expert at this game. And yet it is hard to name what other final value might be involved. There are clearly certain mental capacities actualized, such as memory, analytical reasoning, concentration and the like, but these are not "familiar forms of final value", quite unlike the "moral or alethic or aesthetic or hedonic final value" (Matheson 2015: 22) that Matheson routinely invokes.

Thirdly, reflect on positive personal relationships, such as marriage (cf. Metz 2002b: 811, 2013: 204, 228, 249). Think not about why one might stay in a marriage, and thereby avoid breaking a vow and hence exhibiting moral disvalue that would reduce meaning. Instead, focus on why one might be inclined to get married. If there is meaning here, it lies in the willingness to make a promise in the first place, i.e. to commit to another person, or in the degree of emotional openness and attachment that would lead one to do so. Of course, loyalty and love are "final values", but my point is that they seem so in virtue of their meaningfulness, and not some other readily identifiable type of final value such as morality, happiness, health, art, knowledge or the like that Matheson discusses.¹²

In light of the above cases, I am not yet willing to sign onto the view that meaning is essentially extra-dimensional. Note that if meaning were often, but

¹² Fourth, and with more controversy than the previous cases, consider those who have had a major impact on the course of human history, where the influence is negative or neutral. Think about the possibility of Genghis Khan's life having had meaning in it by virtue of so many future people having been genetically related to him. Or consider the inclination of some philosophers to be willing to ascribe meaning to Adolf Hitler's life, sometimes simply in virtue of the enormous mess he made and the unintended good consequences that came of it in the form of the United Nations, the International Criminal Court or the European Union. I am much less confident there is genuine meaning in these cases; perhaps, as I have considered elsewhere (Metz 2002b: 803), they are instances of impact or what Robert Nozick calls "importance", in contrast to meaningfulness (1989: 171-178).

not always, extra-dimensional, that would probably be enough to capture the advantages Matheson suggested, viz., of being able to make sense of not only why meaning is plausibly deemed to be something deep, but also why people can have personal crises despite the presence of other final values in their lives.

I suspect Matheson is correct that my fundamentality theory cannot capture the claim that meaning is essentially extra-dimensional, but not so much for the reasons he provides. At the heart of his analysis is the interpretation of fundamentality as being about the conditions of human life as such, not any of particular human's life or human society. His key cases are ones in which one weakly promotes something fundamental with regard to human life in general as compared to robustly promotes something fundamental to a particular human or subset of humans. He claims that since there is intuitively comparable value in the pairs of cases, the fundamentality theory cannot account for extra-dimensionality insofar as it involves a greater degree of final value overall upon the presence of meaning.

Matheson is not being uncharitable to read my discussion of fundamentality in this way, as I in *Meaning in Life* most often used examples where human life as such was the relevant object towards which an individual should contour her rationality so as to obtain great meaning. I spoke of supporting reasoning and relating as conditions fundamental to the course of a typical human life; I addressed reproduction, labour, communication, religion, love and natural selection as conditions fundamental to the course of a human society; and I characterized knowing about space-time, gravity and causation as about conditions fundamental to the human environment.

However, I did not intend the relevant object to be solely the general; some notable meaning could come from positively orienting one's rational self towards fundamental features of particular human beings or societies. There were occasions in the book where I pointed this out (e.g., 2013: 216, 226, 228, 230), but it was not admittedly the dominant motif, given my focus on quintessentially meaningful lives such as those of Mandela, Mother Teresa, Picasso, Dostoyevsky, Einstein and Darwin. In recent work I have said more about what it would mean to relate positively to the fundamental features of a subset of humanity such as a person, contending that love of another is intuitively meaningful when directed towards his "deep" features, i.e., his character or what makes him tick, and not merely his more surface properties such as his appearance (Metz 2014d: 104-106).

By my actual view, then, one would have to compare the intensity of the available contouring of one's rational self and the degree of expected outcome, on the one hand, with the extent of influence, on the other, in order to know how best to realize meaning in one's life. If one could do a lot for the fundamental conditions of humanity, or a broad swathe of it, there would be prima facie reasons of meaning to do that, even if at the expense of family, as Mandela elected to do. If, however, one were not in a position to do a lot for humanity, but do could something substantial for the fundamental conditions of the life of one's spouse, considerations of meaning could well counsel the latter.

What I suspect is the deeper (so to speak) incompatibility between extra-dimensionality and fundamentality is that the latter is not always intuitively finally good. Trying to be charitable to me, Matheson at one point says, "I take it, moreover, that Metz intends the fundamental conditions to be fundamentally good ones, or at least not fundamentally bad ones" (2015: 27). However, the view in the book, and the view I still hold, is that some fundamental conditions are "neutral" or even "bad" but could be sources of meaning all the same upon contouring one's rational nature towards them.

The best examples are in the realm of knowledge (Metz 2013: esp. 209, 229, 249). Knowledge about gravity, quarks and light is not about anything good for its own sake, but these are properties that are responsible for, or account for, much else about the environment in which we live, such that discovering facts about them conferred meaning on the lives of natural scientists. And then much of the course of human development has been a function of, and explained by, neurosis, xenophobia and war, which are also not good for their own sake, but revealing facts about them conferred meaning on the lives of social scientists (and novelists, too).

In all, Matheson is probably correct in the final analysis that fundamentality cannot capture extra-dimensionality. However, I would at this point invite the reader to view these cases of intuitively meaningful kinds of knowledge to be further counterexamples to Matheson's extra-dimensionality thesis, so that one should favour fundamentality if one must choose between it and extra-dimensionality.

In his contribution, Minao Kukita also provides reason to question fundamentality as exhaustive of great meaning in life, when it comes to poetry. *Meaning in Life* addressed aesthetic themes, as one dimension of the classic triad of "the good, the true and the beautiful" in the Western tradition. In that

tradition, when trying to differentiate great art from the not so great, it has been standard to maintain that the former is about universal themes, topics that transcend a particular culture, even if expressed in its terms (cf. Metz 2013: 215, 230). I objected to that view on the ground that certain universal themes are intuitively trivial. As an alternative, I suggested that the relevant sub-set of universal themes that are not trivial are those concerning fundamentality, i.e., those addressing conditions of human life largely responsible for the course of typical human lives. That concept, I proposed, is what best captures themes such as character, neurosis, love, morality, family, death, crime, vengeance and the like.

Kukita finds it much too narrow to deem fundamental theme to be a necessary condition for great art, particularly in light of the Eastern aesthetic tradition. More specifically, he appeals to the Japanese poetic form of haiku to suggest that fundamentality is too strict a criterion for art that confers substantial meaning on the artist's life. Kukita's key remarks are here:

For example, the most famous and popular work of haiku ... 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.... I am afraid that there are many other artworks that are apparently about unimportant things but that are nonetheless viewed as great art (2015: 211, 212).

In the book, I felt on shaky ground when discussing aesthetics, but was there particularly concerned that the fundamentality theory could not account well for non-representational works (2013: 231). The force of Kukita's terrific, famous examples is that they are representational works, have often been deemed to be great, but do not appear to be about something fundamental to the human condition.

The strongest way for me to reply is to contend that excellent haiku in general, and the particular instances from Basho, are in fact about fundamental

facets of human life.¹³ A quick perusal of the literature on haiku characterizes it as prompting deep emotions and expressing universal themes of human existence through simple images. Fundamentality promises to capture the core of these ideas.

Consider the specific instances above. Kukita's translation of the haiku about a horse urinating does not readily express in English what many others have felt upon reading the poem, namely, experiences of poverty, irritation, frustration and loneliness, all of which are strong motivations in characteristic human life and hence influence a wide array of other experiences. And then the haiku about the sound of a frog having jumped into a pond prompts awareness of, say, the experience of being absorbed by nature. Or it might occasion reflection on change or animation, viz., a still and quiet body of water being shifted by the movement of a being with an inner life. In short, I suspect that Kukita is not giving Basho his due when he says, "(T)he above-mentioned haiku are apparently representational and about nothing other than an old pond, a frog, flea, lice and a horse urinating" (2015: 212).

Suppose, however, that I and other interpreters are reading too much into these haiku. Or consider that, even if we are not, there are other haiku that are indeed about intuitively superficial topics but that are great all the same. I would naturally like to be able to inspect alleged specimens of the latter, but suppose, for now, that they could be produced. Then, I would propose a weaker position: even if being about a fundamental theme is not necessary for a work of art to be great and to confer substantial meaning on the artist's life, it is *characteristic* of great art to be about what is fundamental to the course of human life. Such a view, perhaps as extended beyond the beautiful to include the good and the true, would, I hope, still be a novel and revealing position.

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¹³ I am grateful to Reza Hosseini for pushing me to take this reply seriously.

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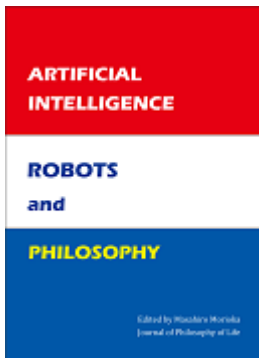
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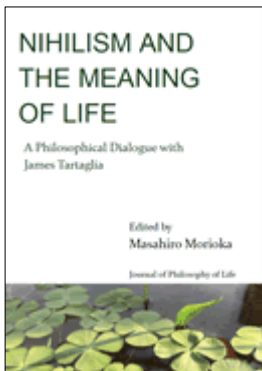


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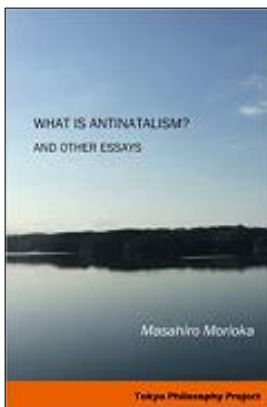
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