

Reply to Brooke Alan Trisel

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Brooke Alan Trisel is an advocate of the ‘meaning *in* life’ research programme and his paper lays out, with admirable clarity and passion, exactly why he thinks it is important. Trisel is very unusual among these figures, however, for he neither conflates ‘meaning *in* life’ with ‘the meaning *of* life’, nor dismissively puts the latter to one side. Rather, he thinks that an account of meaning *in* life might provide an answer to the question of the meaning *of* life. He is not sure, however; he thinks it might, but that more work is needed to find out whether it actually can. The idea that it would provide the answer is simple enough: through individual people doing meaningful things (building up their meaning *in* life), the meaning aggregates, thereby making human life as a whole meaningful (providing us with the meaning *of* life). The problem is that he is not sure whether the meaning can aggregate in such a way as to answer the big question, because he is not sure that humanity can constitute a group; although he is sympathetic to the view that humanity counts as an ‘unorganized social group’. Nevertheless, despite these sympathies, he cautiously concedes that if ‘human beings do not make up a group that has the potential to be meaningful, then claiming that “humanity” is “meaningful” or “meaningless” would be *nonsensical*’ (p. 176). So there are only two viable answers to the question of the meaning of life, on Trisel’s view: either the question makes no sense (if humanity is not a group), or the meaning of life is the aggregate of the meanings of individual lives.

Nihilism is a non-starter, on Trisel’s view, given the existence of social meaning. But what about the religious answer that life is provided with meaning by a transcendent context? Suppose there is such a context, and suppose also that humanity constitutes a group. In that case, we would have two competing answers to the question of the meaning of life. This suggests to me that Trisel has invented a new question. Here are some indicators of this. Firstly, on his view, the question may not make sense, depending on how work on the metaphysics of groups turns out. But it evidently does make some kind of sense, given that so many people

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have asked it; even if we assume that philosophers will one day determine the definitive truth about groups, which I would not, the result of this would not be the abandonment of the question as senseless, but rather a reinterpretation of the question which captured its sense. Another indicator is that nihilism is not even possible on his view, given the manifest situation we all find ourselves in. And yet in full awareness of that situation, many sensible people have worried about, and even endorsed, nihilism. How can they have failed to notice that our actions have meaning for others and for ourselves? The indicator I began with is clearest, however, for suppose the transcendent meaning were revealed to us in some epistemically indisputable fashion: God simultaneously interrupts everybody's consciousness to reveal a mind-blowing answer which makes perfect sense. I doubt anybody – Trisel included – would say: 'No, that's not the meaning of life! Analytic philosophy already answered that one. You're answering a different question.' What would that 'different question' be, exactly?

What God would have to tell us is the reason there is a reality; a reality that includes both humans and God, of course. In light of this reason, he might have to tell us not only the meaning of human life, but of his own life too – if this had any bearing on the meaning of our lives, as it presumably would. As I stressed from the outset in *Meaningless*, any answer to the question of the meaning of life must address this existential issue. Otherwise, it would not be true to the intentions of this perfectly natural question, and so would not answer it. Nevertheless Trisel proceeds to claim that there can be a meaning of life within a physical universe that emerged, meaninglessly, from the Big Bang. He accepts that there is no meaningful reason for human life, of the kind that only a transcendent context could provide. But in that case, the only answer available to him, if he wants to stick with the question, is nihilism. Despite his best intentions, however, he does not stick with the question, but rather uses the meaning *in* life idea to invent a new one: the question of what aggregate of social meaning our lives collectively produce. Imagine announcing to the world: 'the meaning of life is that our knowledge, loving relationships, etc., give us a collective score of X meaning-points'; the world would respond, 'that doesn't tell us why we're here ... and what's the point of doing all of that stuff anyway?'

This switch reveals Trisel's real interest in 'the meaning of life', which like the rest of the meaning *in* life advocates, I think, is not metaphysics but rather normative ethics. It provides them with an evocative and hence powerful platform from which to theorise about how we ought to live our lives; just as religious

answers to the original question continue to provide that kind of platform. Since I think this muddies the waters, I would rather they restricted themselves to theorising directly, in their naturalistic fashion, about what we ought to do in order to live the good life; which is all I think they are really doing. There are also foundational theoretical flaws to the idea of attaching this label to normative theorising, as I argue in the book; much too harshly, I admit (see the introduction to this symposium). But the arguments are there and Trisel does not engage with any of them. Instead, he goes on the offensive by trying to show that I have my own foundational problems; a venerable tactic with a good track-record, of course. So let me turn to those arguments.

The immediate problem I face is that the position Trisel addresses is not my own; if this were an issue of fine-grained interpretation then I would simply gloss over it. But he says,

Tartaglia argues that humanity was not created for a purpose and, therefore, is meaningless. He assumes that humanity could not be meaningful unless we were created for a purpose. (p. 160; see also p. 162)

I said that our having a purpose is just a ‘tantalizing possibility’ (PML, p. 2) which accounts for much of the human interest in the question, and that as such, ‘the only options capable of resolving the issue of its own terms are that reality exists for a reason (*which either does or does not attribute purpose to human life*), or that reality does not exist for a reason’ (PML, p. 3; italics added to the original). Trisel even quotes me saying that, ‘the meaning of our lives might consist in *being* valuable, rather than having the capacity for *doing* something valuable [i.e. rather than having the capacity to achieve some purpose]’ (p. 162 / PML, p. 2). So surely he must have known that my view is that life could be meaningful even if we have no purpose, and hence that I did not argue as he says I do. As his title says, human life could be unintended but meaningful; I agree.

This threatens to make my task of responding less interesting than it might have been. Thus when Trisel says I use ‘the phrase “context of meaning” in an *overly narrow* way, to mean a context that has a purpose’ (p. 164), this is simply incorrect. Likewise, when he suggests that my transcendent context of meaning must really be God, since to give the universe a purpose it must be able to ‘think, plan, and have a goal(s)’ (p. 163). But rather than pedantically go through the paper in this fashion, let me skip to the main argument.

The argument is as follows. Suppose God created the physical universe, and then made Adam and Eve for the purpose of discovering whether he could make intelligent life from matter. There are now seven billion people because of this initial act, but God has no purpose for any of us; we are an epiphenomenon of his experiment. So, ‘Is humanity, *as a whole*, meaningful or meaningless in this scenario?’ (p. 171). Then in a variation, Trisel supposes that God makes humanity for a purpose, but only 20% of people pay heed to it. Would humanity then be meaningful? And if not, what percentage of triers would be required?

The answer is that it depends on whether there is a transcendent context of meaning in which God and the physical universe exists, and if so, what its nature is. If there is one, then if that context attributes meaning to humanity as a whole, then humanity is meaningful. If that context attributes meaning to just one person, or perhaps just their finger, then that person, or just their finger, is meaningful. If that context does not attribute meaning to humanity as a whole, then either humanity as a whole, or just the people (or body-parts) it misses out, would be meaningless. But if there is no context of meaning, then we have a much simpler answer: humanity as a whole is meaningless. Now you might be inclined to object that the context could not make just one person meaningful, and especially not just one person’s finger, because their existence would be implicated with others: the meaning of their ancestors would be to give rise to the meaningful people, for instance. To react in this way, however, would demonstrate a ‘failure to grasp the enormity of a transcendent hypothesis of meaning’ (PML, p. 52), as I put it. For if the physical universe really does exist within a wider context of meaning, we really have no idea what is going on: the kind of reasoning employed in the objection, which works in the objective world, goes straight out of the window. That is why I describe such hypotheses as idle possibilities. My nihilism, by contrast, takes it for granted that our notions of a meaningful reality will not apply to the transcendent context; and if reality is not meaningful, then it is meaningless, just as objective thought suggests it is.

Trisel’s objection takes it that I am thinking of God making people for a purpose, which would be a highly specific hypothesis about transcendent reality, of the kind our cultural history primes us for. Within these strictures, he supposes that God’s purpose for Adam and Eve would make their lives meaningful. But that would depend on whether God’s existence was meaningful; and if it was, whether the meaningful context that made him meaningful also made his purpose for Adam and Eve meaningful. But perhaps the idea is that God actually *is* the

transcendent context; he provides his own self-explanatory context, rather as for physicalists, the physical universe provides its own meaningless context. I think this is what Trisel has in mind. Well in that case, monistic pantheism would be true: God would be reality. What one of 'his purposes' could be, in that case, I really have no idea; but luckily my view that positive transcendent hypotheses of meaning are baseless exempts me from having to speculate. However, if his purposes are required to make us meaningful, then I myself would not say that humanity as a whole is meaningful unless we are not all covered; if one person is missed out then it is simply the vast majority of human life that is meaningful. But to be honest, had I not decided to play ball, I could have quite legitimately responded from the outset that Trisel's questions are for the theologians. All I claim is that if reality is transcendent, then human life could be meaningful; the meaningful context *could* implicate everyone, so humanity, construed as either a group or a collection of individuals, *could* be meaningful. Questions about what to say if it does not implicate everyone, what bearing God's purposes play, etc., are simply not for me; given that I do not think there is any such context.

Another issue for the theologians that Trisel presents me with concerns whether a meaningful life would be 'degrading' and lacking in free will (pp. 165-6). This is because I said that if we live in a meaningful context, then our actions would have their meaning bestowed by this context whether we liked it or not. But Trisel himself thinks there are intrinsically meaningful activities; he has not realised that this places him in exactly the same boat. If we enter into a loving relationship, on his view, this will be meaningful whether we like it or not. Does that make such relationships degrading, and does it follow that we cannot enter into them freely? These are not questions for me, but personally I do not feel degraded by my lack of choice over the objective interpretations that hold true of me, such as those concerning my age and eye-colour; if Trisel or the religious philosophers are right, then the meaning of all our actions would figure among these. If this worries him, then perhaps he should reconsider his commitment to moral objectivism.

The distinction between holism and individualism about groups has no relevance to my position, because if there is no transcendent context of meaning, human life is meaningless however you construe it. Moreover, Trisel is mistaken in thinking that my holistic approach neglects the individualist question, because as I make plain in the book, if human life is meaningless, then every individual person's life is too. He says that this top-down approach has made no progress (p.

172), but I deny this. This sounds to me like frustration at our inability to discover the meaning of life: only one answer is deemed acceptable, because of the false assumption that nihilism is bad. Trisel pigeon-holes me with the religious thinkers on this issue, but all I said is that they have the question right; unlike naturalists who transform it into something they can answer positively, because the influence of religion makes them think that nihilism is bad. He thinks I am ‘disappointed’ that we lack a purpose and that I ‘lament’ nihilism (p.166). But for what it is worth, he has me all wrong: I was actually quite excited when I first started taking nihilism seriously as a substantive metaphysical claim.

At the end of his paper, we see the kind of issue that really concerns Trisel: issues such as population explosion and the effects this has on the environment. Extremely important, I entirely agree. He wants to use his views on meaning in life to address them, but as immediately becomes clear, this make matters worse. For if meaning in life is an objective commodity, it makes sense to maximise it by increasing the population; but Trisel, like me, does not want the environment to be ruined. So he argues that if there were too many people, life would be so bad that total meaning would decrease. He will never be able to do those sums, however. If he were to forget about meaning in life and argue directly for sustainable development, he would have one less problem to worry about. A related problem with objectivising meaning as a route to normative ethical theorising which I have highlighted (Tartaglia 2016), is that since various different senses of a ‘meaningful life’ have widespread currency, promoting this notion could exacerbate a phenomenon we are already witnessing, in which people try to make their life objectively meaningful by doing morally reprehensible, but nevertheless significant or subjectively engaging, things. If the meaning in life advocates were arguing against these other senses, then I would obviously not object; but it seems to me that they simply presuppose a moral component, and that the moral sense they want to promote over others is on the weakest theoretical ground if we are talking about something objective. I think that if meaning in life advocates want us to value knowledge, art and charity, then they should argue directly for why we should value these things, and give up on the meaning in life agenda, which encourages them to simply take these things for granted by *starting* with the intuition that, ‘obviously, these things add meaning to life’.

References

Tartaglia, J. (2016) 'Transculturalism and the Meaning of Life', *Humanities*, 5 (2): 1-13.