

# Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.1

International Perspectives

Edited by  
Masahiro Morioka

Journal of Philosophy of Life





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Edited by Masahiro Morioka

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# Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.1

## International Perspectives

### Contents

Preface Masahiro Morioka	i
How Human Life Matters in the Universe : A Reply to David Benatar Brooke Alan Trisel	1-15
The 'Subjective Attraction' and 'Objective Attractiveness' of the Practice of the Rites in the <i>Xunzi</i> Angel On Ki Ting	16-32
Meaning of Life and Nonsense in <i>Tractatus</i> : No Answer for No Question and Some Fictional Illuminations Isabel G. Camero Cabrera	33-53
The Philosophical Investigations as a Christian Text: Christian Faith and Wittgenstein's Rule-following Jairus Diesta Espiritu	54-63
The Moral Status of Infants and Fetuses : Teleological Potential, Justice and Charity Sara Chan Yun Yu	64-81
A Solipsistic and Affirmation-Based Approach to Meaning in Life Masahiro Morioka	82-97

Information about the Authors

## Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers and essays published in the Special Issue “Philosophy and Meaning in Life: International Perspectives Vol.1,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.9, No.1, 2019, pp.1-97.

Professor Thaddeus Metz, Professor Nobuo Kurata, and I held the First International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life at Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan, on August 20-21, 2018. This was probably the first submission-based international conference on this topic. We accepted 40 presentations from around the world, and invited Professor David Benatar as a keynote speaker (other keynote speakers were Professor Metz and I).

After the conference, we called for papers for publication from the speakers and we accepted six papers for the special issue of *Journal of Philosophy of Life*. We would like to give special thanks to anonymous referees who kindly reviewed submitted manuscripts. The accepted papers deal with a variety of topics such as anti-natalism, ancient Chinese philosophy, Wittgenstein, bioethics, and solipsism, and are all discussed from the perspective of the philosophy of meaning in life.

In 2019, we are going to hold the Second International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life at Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. We are planning to publish a collection of the presented papers in *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.10, to be published in 2020.

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

Masahiro Morioka

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

June, 30, 2019.

\*Masahiro Morioka (ed.) *Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.1: International Perspectives*. *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, (June 2019): i.

# How Human Life Matters in the Universe

## A Reply to David Benatar

Brooke Alan Trisel\*

### Abstract

In his book, *The Human Predicament*, David Benatar claims that our individual lives and human life, in general, do not make a difference beyond Earth and, therefore, are meaningless from the vast, cosmic perspective. In this paper, I will explain how what we do matters from the cosmic perspective. I will provide examples of how human beings have transcended our limits, thereby giving human life some meaning from the cosmic perspective. Also, I will argue that human life could become even more meaningful by making some fundamental achievements, such as determining how life originated.

### 1. Introduction

Many philosophers have concluded that our individual lives can be meaningful even if God does not exist and death marks the permanent end of our existence.<sup>1</sup> David Benatar, in his thought-provoking book *The Human Predicament*, acknowledges that one's life can be objectively meaningful from human-based perspectives. However, he contends that our individual lives and human life, in general, are meaningless from the cosmic perspective. "We are insignificant specks in a vast universe that is utterly indifferent to us," Benatar writes.<sup>2</sup> The "cosmic perspective," as Benatar calls it, is also sometimes referred to in the literature as "the point of view of the universe," "the view from nowhere," "the view from everywhere," and *sub specie aeternitatis*.

I will seek to contribute to the literature by explaining how what we do matters from the cosmic perspective. There is a blossoming literature on what gives meaning to one's *individual* life – a topic called "meaning in life." In

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\*\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the First International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan on August 21, 2018. Thank you to the participants at the presentation for your questions and comments. Thanks also to an anonymous referee for helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Metz (2013) and Landau (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Benatar (2017), p. 2.

contrast, scant attention has been given to the topic of “meaning of life.”<sup>3</sup> There have been only a few attempts to explain how human life, in general, could be meaningful or significant<sup>4</sup> from a cosmic and nonreligious perspective.<sup>5</sup>

In section two, I will provide an overview of Benatar’s argument that life is meaningless from the cosmic perspective. In section three, I will explain how human life makes a difference beyond Earth and will argue that achievements are an extraordinary type of event that will stand out in cosmic history. In section four, I will point out some deficiencies of Benatar’s analysis. Also, I will provide examples of how human beings have transcended our limits, thereby giving some meaning to human life from the cosmic perspective. In section five, I will argue that human life could become even more meaningful by making some fundamental achievements, such as determining how life on Earth originated. Then, in section six, I will explain how one’s individual life could be meaningful from the cosmic perspective.

## **2. An Overview of Benatar’s Argument**

Benatar begins his argument by asserting that attaining meaning is about “transcending limits.” “A meaningful life is one that transcends one’s own limits and significantly impacts others or serves purposes beyond oneself,” he writes.<sup>6</sup> As do other supporters of “objective naturalism,”<sup>7</sup> including myself, Benatar believes that a person’s life could be meaningful (or meaningless) even if this person believes otherwise. Also, he argues that meaning comes in varying amounts such that a person’s life could be meaningless, somewhat meaningful, or meaningful. He contends that whether one’s life is meaningful can be assessed from different perspectives, including three human-based perspectives and the cosmic perspective.

The human-based perspectives include the viewpoint of an individual, a

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the discussion about “meaning of life” continues to be from a religious perspective. See, for example, Mawson (2016) and Seachris and Goetz (2016).

<sup>4</sup> I will use the words “meaningful” and “significant” interchangeably. The difference in the meaning of these words, if any, is so slight that it is immaterial to this analysis.

<sup>5</sup> See Landau (2011) and Kahane (2014). I will discuss Landau’s view later in this paper. Kahane argues that humanity would be of great cosmic significance if there is no sentient life elsewhere in the universe. For discussion and criticism of this argument, see Benatar (2017), pp. 47-51, and Hughes (2017).

<sup>6</sup> Benatar (2017), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth discussion of objective naturalism, see Metz (2013), pp. 180-239.

family or community, or all of humanity. From the perspective of an individual, Mary, for example, can make a sufficiently positive impact on the life of another person to give Mary's life meaning. From the perspective of a small group of people, such as a family, one may play an important role in one's family, perhaps as the primary caregiver, thereby giving one's life meaning from this perspective. As the perspective expands from an individual to a small group to all of humanity, it becomes *more difficult* for one's life to be meaningful from that larger perspective. Whereas the lives of many people are meaningful from the narrower perspectives of an individual or a small group of people, very few people have made a difference to all of humanity, Benatar argues. He mentions Albert Einstein, Alan Turing, and the Buddha as examples of individuals whose lives were meaningful from the "perspective of humanity."

The cosmic perspective is the broadest perspective. It encompasses times long before humanity emerged and long after humanity will go extinct. Of course, the universe, as a whole, does not literally have a perspective. However, we can imagine the view that an impartial observer would have if this observer could witness the entire universe unfold over time. Assessing human life from this broad, external viewpoint can help us assess, in an unbiased way, whether what we do matters beyond Earth.<sup>8</sup>

Benatar, of course, is not the first philosopher to claim that human life is meaningless from the cosmic perspective. To give another example, Simon Blackburn writes: "To a witness with the whole of space and time in its view, nothing on a human scale will have meaning (it is hard to imagine how it could be visible at all – there is an awful *lot* of space and time out there)."<sup>9</sup>

As support for his conclusion that human life is meaningless and that it would not have mattered if we had never come into existence, Benatar asserts that human life was not created for a reason and that we do not make a difference beyond Earth.<sup>10</sup> We have some control over Earth, but have very little control over what happens beyond Earth.<sup>11</sup>

James Tartaglia also argues that human life is meaningless, but he thinks this

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<sup>8</sup> I will not attempt to outline a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the cosmic perspective. When discussing this perspective, philosophers generally mention the vastness of time and space (i.e., temporal and spatial components). Recently, there has been debate about whether this perspective also includes modal and ontological components. See Seachris (2013) and Landau (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Blackburn (2001), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Benatar (2017), p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. Hughes (2017) makes a similar claim.

is just a “neutral fact.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Benatar thinks that being cosmically insignificant would be terrible and that people are justified in being concerned that we do not make a difference beyond Earth.<sup>13</sup>

Blackburn’s concern that what we do is invisible is a lesser concern than that life is meaningless because it might be unnecessary for our efforts to be visible for them to make a difference beyond Earth. Nonetheless, I will address both concerns in the next section.

### 3. Making a Difference from the Cosmic Perspective

Viewing our lives from the vast, cosmic perspective can make us feel tiny, fleeting, and, worse yet, inconsequential. It may seem as if we are stranded on an island, not knowing how we got here and what we should do with our lives. In this mysterious universe in which we find ourselves, we help each other, which is one way we give meaning to our individual lives from human-based perspectives. However, our efforts may seem isolated from, and inconsequential to, the rest of the universe. How, if at all, do our efforts matter beyond Earth?

I concede to Benatar that human life was not created for a reason, such as to fulfill a purpose of nature or a god, and that we have very little control over the rest of the universe. However, we make a difference from the cosmic perspective in another way. By engaging in inherently worthwhile pursuits, such as making moral, intellectual, and artistic achievements, it *adds intrinsic value to the universe* and gives meaning to our individual lives and to human life, in general. One might agree that this can add meaning to one’s individual life, but then wonder how this would add meaning to humanity.

There are two ways of thinking about “humanity.” Humanity can be thought of holistically, as *one*, or, individualistically, as the *many* human beings that make up the whole.<sup>14</sup> If we think of humanity holistically, as I suspect most people do, it becomes difficult to see how humanity could be meaningful because human life was not created for a reason, and the billions of human beings dispersed across Earth do not have an overarching goal(s) that we are cooperatively pursuing. In fact, some people have conflicting goals.

Alternatively, if we think of humanity individualistically, as *many human*

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<sup>12</sup> Tartaglia (2016), p. ix. I reply to Tartaglia in Trisel (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Benatar (2017), pp. 36, 51-62.

<sup>14</sup> For more discussion, see Trisel (2016), pp. 7-12 and (2017), pp. 168-172.

*beings*, it reveals a way that humanity could become meaningful. Although individuals pursue diverse goals, if meaning is something that aggregates across human beings, then by adding meaning to our individual lives, we would thereby also be adding meaning to humanity. Through our individual efforts, we would be giving humanity meaning from the “bottom-up.” A brick wall is constructed from the ground, brick by brick. Similarly, individual human beings are the foundation of humanity. One by one, as more individual lives become meaningful, humanity, in turn, would become more meaningful.

Making achievements is one source of meaning in our lives, as many philosophers have argued.<sup>15</sup> Achievements create a product and result from a structured process, as Gwen Bradford argues.<sup>16</sup> Achievements do not happen by accident. They require thought, planning, skill, and determination. One feature of great achievements is that they are *difficult to make*.<sup>17</sup>

Achievements are intrinsically valuable, meaning that they are valuable “in and of themselves,” and may also be instrumentally valuable in helping other people or non-human animals. Bradford convincingly argues that the overall value of an achievement is determined by: (1) the degree of effort and rationality exercised by the individual(s) who made the achievement and (2) the amount of intrinsic and instrumental value that results from the product of the achievement.<sup>18</sup> For example, washing one’s car, which requires minimal effort and thought, is a far less valuable achievement than the formulation of the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein, which required a high degree of prolonged effort.

Because we are tiny beings on a small planet in this immense universe, Blackburn doubts whether what we do is even visible from the cosmic perspective. Achievements are a type of event that will stand out from this perspective. From human-based perspectives, we take achievements for granted, which occurs because nearly every human being makes at least some minor achievements, and the products from some achievements, such as the airplane and computer, have become assimilated into our everyday lives. However, by expanding our perspective beyond humanity to include the rest of the universe, it reveals that achievements are an *extraordinary type of event* insofar as they are

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Bradford (2015), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Bradford (2015), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 26-63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

intrinsically valuable, *planned*, and are *only made by rational beings*.

Human beings have made many great achievements, including creating language, music, and the United Nations. When compared to all of the other events in cosmic history, such as the collision of subatomic particles and the implosion of stars, human achievements are a miniscule proportion of all events. Nonetheless, because achievements are an extraordinary type of event, they will stand out from all other events in the universe. It is true, as Blackburn indicates, that there is an “awful *lot* of space and time out there.”<sup>19</sup> Although the universe contains trillions of inanimate, physical objects, such as electrons and stars, *not one of them will ever make an achievement*. Indeed, if Earth is the only planet that harbors intelligent life, then the *only achievements that have occurred in this universe* would be on or near Earth.

#### **4. Transcending Achievements**

As argued, human life has made a difference by adding intrinsic value to the universe, which has given human life some meaning from the cosmic perspective. Because achievements are an extraordinary type of event, they will stand out from all other events in cosmic history. In response, a skeptic might argue that the achievements I mentioned (creating language, music, and the United Nations) do not transcend our limits and, therefore, might not be of great value from the cosmic perspective.

As will be discussed in this section, human beings have also made some achievements that have transcended our limits – what I will refer to as “transcending achievements.” During the last 300 years, through creativity, determination, technological innovation, and scientific experimentation, human beings have made some transcending achievements. As the difficulty of making an achievement increases, the *value that results* from that achievement tends to increase, as discussed earlier. Thus, transcending achievements, which are extremely difficult to make, add substantial value to the universe.

In the 13.772-billion-year history of the universe, modern day humans (*Homo sapiens*) emerged very recently – approximately 200,000 years ago. Consequently, the “perspective of humanity,” as Benatar calls it, is a recent and narrow perspective that extends from 200,000 years ago to the eventual

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<sup>19</sup> Blackburn (2001), p. 79.

extinction of human life.

As you recall, Benatar argues that meaning is about “transcending limits.”<sup>20</sup> However, he does not assess whether humanity has transcended its limits. This is a serious deficiency with his analysis, given that he endorses the transcendence theory of meaning.<sup>21</sup> If meaning is accrued by transcending limits, but Benatar does not assess whether humanity has transcended its limits, then how can Benatar know that human life is meaningless? To be fair, Benatar does give some consideration to whether we make a difference beyond Earth, but he does not consider whether we have transcended our limits.

In what follows, I will provide some examples of how humanity has transcended its limits – limits that are reflected in the narrow “perspective of humanity.” Many of our distant ancestors believed that Earth was created 6,000 years ago. Through the study of geology and astronomy, we now know that Earth existed for more than *4 billion years before modern day humans emerged*. And Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection explains how simpler life-forms evolved, *over millions of years*, into various human species, which evolved into *Homo sapiens*.

Benatar bemoans that we have very little control over other parts of the universe, but it is unclear why he thinks we need this control. He seems to see this as a way of “making a difference” to the rest of the universe. However, without knowing what we would do if we had this control, it is unclear how this would make a difference. Having more control over other parts of the universe has proven to be *unnecessary* for us to explore and learn about the universe. For example, Isaac Newton set forth his famous three laws of motion without traveling to, or controlling, other parts of the universe. Because Newton’s laws of motion apply *throughout the universe*, they exemplify an achievement that transcended the “perspective of humanity.”

The invention of the telescope to explore the universe is another example of a transcending achievement. In 1929, using the telescope, the astronomer Edwin Hubble made the remarkable discovery that distant galaxies are moving away from us rapidly, which suggested that the universe is expanding. In 1990, a telescope named in honor of Hubble – the “Hubble Space Telescope” – was launched into orbit around Earth.

Although we cannot travel to far away planets or back in time, it is

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<sup>20</sup> Benatar (2017), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> For more discussion of this theory of meaning, see Metz (2013), pp. 28-30.

unnecessary to do this to learn about the universe because light waves, emitted long ago, *travel to us*<sup>22</sup> and these waves reveal some of cosmic history. The Hubble Space Telescope, a sort of time machine, captures these images of the early universe, thereby allowing us to observe what happened billions of years ago. This telescope has led to many important discoveries,<sup>23</sup> including providing data for scientists to develop a more precise estimate of when the universe originated (13.772 billion years ago).

In 1990, with ground-based telescopes, we could visualize distant galaxies, as they were six billion years after the Big Bang. By 2010, after some enhancements to the Hubble Space Telescope, we could look much further back in time and observe distant galaxies 480 million years after the universe originated.<sup>24</sup> As I have sought to demonstrate, through the development and use of technology, human beings have transcended the recent and narrow “perspective of humanity” by an astounding *13 billion years*,<sup>25</sup> thereby giving human life some meaning from the cosmic perspective.

By utilizing telescopes, it has allowed us to transcend our limits and explore that which is *extremely large* – planets, stars, and galaxies. We have also transcended our limits by exploring that which is *extremely small* – subatomic particles. Particle accelerators, such as the Large Hadron Collider, are being used to test theories about the structure and dynamics of the subatomic world and to advance our understanding of how quantum physics relates to the general theory of relativity.

Would an impartial observer, with a view of everything, agree with Benatar that human life is meaningless? I do not think so. By observing that achievements are an extraordinary type of event in the universe, and that human beings have made some transcending achievements that have added substantial value to the universe, an impartial observer would conclude that human life is somewhat meaningful from the cosmic perspective.

A skeptic might reply, as an anonymous referee did, that “Our knowledge of the cosmos is not the same as our mattering from the cosmic perspective.” I am not suggesting that merely possessing knowledge of the cosmos is sufficient to give human life meaning from the cosmic perspective. If that were true, then

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<sup>22</sup> Light travels outward from its source in all directions.

<sup>23</sup> See NASA (2017).

<sup>24</sup> NASA (2011).

<sup>25</sup> This figure was calculated by comparing when *Homo sapiens* emerged (200,000 years ago) to how far back in time we have been able to look with the Hubble Space Telescope (13.29 billion years ago).

humanity would be meaningful if an *extraterrestrial life-form had formulated* the laws of motion and the general theory of relativity and then passed this knowledge on to us. What makes human life somewhat meaningful from the cosmic perspective is that human beings made some extremely difficult to make achievements that transcended the narrow “perspective of humanity” and resulted in highly valuable products.

## **5. Fundamental Achievements**

As discussed in the prior section, human beings have made some transcending achievements, such as estimating when the universe originated. However, we have not yet answered the fundamental questions of how the universe and life on Earth originated. By answering these questions, which I will refer to as “fundamental achievements,” it would add substantial meaning to human life.

There are other achievements that would qualify as fundamental achievements. However, for the sake of brevity, I will focus on the two examples mentioned above. In what follows, I will first provide some background on the searches for how the universe and life originated. Then, I will explain why these particular achievements would add substantial meaning to human life.

Hubble’s observation that the universe is expanding led astrophysicists to hypothesize that all of the matter and energy in the universe were once compacted into an infinitesimally small volume, which erupted and is otherwise known as the “Big Bang.” The Big Bang theory continues to be the leading explanation for how the universe originated. However, in recent years, some scientists have become concerned with some parts of the theory.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, there is more work to be done to determine how the universe originated.

Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection explains how life evolved on Earth, but it does not address the fundamental question of how life on Earth originated. At first glance, this question might not appear to transcend the perspective of what happens on Earth. However, origin-of-life researchers approach this question from the broader cosmic perspective for two reasons. First, in thinking about how life could have originated, and when the necessary conditions would have been in place for this to occur, they take into account

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<sup>26</sup> For further discussion, see Rhook and Zangari (1994).

what astronomers have learned about the age and evolution of the universe and Earth.<sup>27</sup> Second, some scientists have hypothesized that microbial life, or at least the building blocks of life, might have originated beyond Earth and then were later transferred to Earth by meteorites, comets, or interplanetary dust particles.<sup>28</sup>

Other prominent theories for how life on Earth originated include the “prebiotic soup theory,” where organic compounds necessary for the creation of life were generated from the interaction between sunlight and lightning in the early atmosphere. Alternatively, life might have originated in deep-sea hydrothermal systems.<sup>29</sup>

Bradford reflects on the question “what would be the most valuable achievements overall?”<sup>30</sup> She argues that the most valuable achievements will be extremely difficult to make, will involve an excellent exercise of rationality, and will have supremely valuable products. As I will explain, determining how the universe and life on Earth originated meet these criteria.

Because of the vast size and age of the universe, and because things in the universe are continually changing, which can thereby wipe out clues that would help us answer fundamental questions, it would be extremely difficult for human beings, or any other life-form, to determine how the universe and life originated. When something is extremely difficult, this can be demotivating to some people and motivating to others. We should not let this difficulty discourage us. This difficulty is a *large part* of why answering these questions would add substantial meaning to human life (or to an extraterrestrial life-form that answers these questions).

If there is intelligent life on other planets, they might not be interested in learning about topics that human beings pursue from the “perspective of humanity,” such as anthropology. However, they undoubtedly would be interested in the fundamental, existential questions. They would want to know how they and the universe originated. They would also want to know how life on Earth originated because this might provide them with insight regarding how life on their planet originated.<sup>31</sup> Life on different planets might have originated

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<sup>27</sup> For a historical and scientific overview of the question of how life on Earth originated, see Fry (2000).

<sup>28</sup> See Fry (2000), pp. 61-62, 131-134 and Kitadai and Maruyama (2017), pp. 4-5.

<sup>29</sup> Kitadai and Maruyama (2017), pp. 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Bradford (2015), p. 188.

<sup>31</sup> One of the primary reasons that scientists search for life beyond Earth is because it may provide

from the same or a very similar process. Thus, these questions about our origins are *universal* insofar as all intelligent life-forms will have these questions. If it turns out that life exists only on Earth, and we determine how life on Earth originated, then we would thereby also be explaining how life originated in the universe.

Answering the fundamental questions of how did the universe and life originate would “make a difference” by adding substantial intrinsic value to the universe and satisfying our longstanding desire to know about our origins. Furthermore, if there is intelligent life elsewhere, these achievements would likely be instrumentally valuable to these other life-forms, in terms of satisfying their curiosity or helping them deal with existential anguish – assuming, of course, that they become aware of these achievements.

If we make a fundamental achievement, but no one other than human beings know that this occurred, this might be of little consolation to those individuals who are concerned that human beings make no difference beyond Earth. However, we should distinguish between “making a difference” and having that difference recognized and appreciated. It would be true that we made a difference even if the rest of the universe was unaware that it occurred.

## **6. How One’s Individual Life Can be Meaningful from the Cosmic Perspective**

I will now turn to the question of whether one’s *individual* life can be meaningful from the cosmic perspective. Iddo Landau has responded to this question. He begins by making an important distinction between *perspectives* for viewing our lives and *standards* for judging whether or not our lives are meaningful. He argues that assessing our lives from the cosmic perspective need not render them meaningless, as long as we use reasonable standards for this evaluation.

Some philosophers use a standard of perfection to judge whether life is meaningful. They argue that our individual lives and human life, in general, are ultimately meaningless in the absence of God and personal immortality.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Landau argues that “one may be taken to have had a meaningful life, if,

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insight into how life on Earth originated. For further discussion, see Davies (2010), p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Supernaturalist theories of meaning reflect the desire for perfection, as Metz (2013, pp. 132-133, 137-138) has convincingly argued.

for instance, one achieved some deep understanding, happiness, or artistic accomplishment that did not affect anyone else.” This is true, he argues, from an individual perspective *and from the cosmic perspective*.<sup>33</sup>

As support for this argument, he points out that according to some religions, God – who is thought to have a view of everything – may judge an action (such as helping another person) to be meaningful even if that action has only a very limited effect. In response, Benatar suggests that the reason the action with the very limited effect seems meaningful is because Landau is imagining that God is viewing it from a local perspective, not from the broader cosmic perspective.<sup>34</sup> I disagree. It is clear that many Christians believe that God has a view of everything, through the powers of omniscience and omnipresence, and that, from this view, he judges some human actions with very limited effects to be meaningful.

After providing his religious based example, Landau then asserts that an action with a very limited effect can also be meaningful in a Godless universe. However, the scenario in which a small action is meaningful according to Christian teachings is much different from the scenario in which a small action occurs in a Godless universe, as I will explain.

If human life had been created by God to fulfill a purpose, and a person successfully carried out his or her role, we assume that God would judge that this person’s actions were meaningful, *even if God had given this person only a small role*. A small action and effect by a person might help God *fulfill his plan*, thereby “making a difference” and giving this person’s action some meaning from the cosmic perspective. This is the reason why the religious based example provides support for Landau’s argument that a small action can be meaningful from the cosmic perspective.

But if God does not exist, how would a small action by a person make a difference to the rest of the universe *beyond Earth*? For Landau’s argument to be convincing, it must address this crucial question, which I will attempt to do.

A small action by a human being can make a difference beyond Earth by adding intrinsic value to the universe. If that action were never performed, then the universe would have less value than it does. Adding value to the universe is how human beings can make a difference from the cosmic perspective and how

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<sup>33</sup> Landau (2011), pp. 729-730. See also Landau (2017), pp. 93-99. For a response, see Seachris (2013).

<sup>34</sup> Benatar (2017), p. 223, n. 40.

a small action can be meaningful, even when viewed from the cosmic perspective.

Whether an individual's *whole life* will be meaningful from the cosmic perspective will depend on *how much* intrinsic value this person contributes to the universe. If a person makes an artistic accomplishment that does not affect anyone else, this would add some value to the universe, but it seems doubtful that it would be sufficient to make this person's whole life meaningful from the cosmic perspective. In contrast, the development of the theory of relativity by Einstein was a pioneering and influential achievement that transcended the "perspective of humanity" and resulted in a very valuable product. Consequently, Einstein's transcending achievements would have added substantial intrinsic value to the universe, thereby making his life meaningful from the cosmic perspective.

## **7. Conclusion**

Some people are satisfied knowing that their individual lives can be meaningful from human-based perspectives. Other people seek more than this. They want their lives and human life, in general, to matter from the cosmic perspective. As argued in this paper, our efforts matter and not just to each other. They also matter from the cosmic perspective in the following way. By engaging in inherently worthwhile pursuits, it adds intrinsic value to the universe and gives meaning to our individual lives. And, if meaning aggregates across human beings, then the meaning that we give to our individual lives also gives meaning to humanity.

It is my hope that this paper will encourage others to reflect on life's meaning from the cosmic perspective. Although viewing our lives from the cosmic perspective starkly reveals our limitations and can be intimidating, it can also show how some events that we take for granted from human-based perspectives are special and valuable in the universe. For example, it revealed that achievements are an extraordinary type of event.

Human beings have made many achievements, including some transcending achievements. By continuing to transcend our limits, and answering fundamental questions about our origins, it would stand out in cosmic history, add substantial meaning to human life, and be worthy of pride.

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# The ‘Subjective Attraction’ and ‘Objective Attractiveness’ of the Practice of the Rites in the *Xunzi*

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## Abstract

Xunzi is well-known for his claim that “human nature is evil (e 惡)” and that the rites (li 禮) are established to bring order to a society. Most research on Xunzi has thus focused on how the transformation of human nature (hua xing qi wei 化性起偽) is possible and the role of the rites in the development of a moral agent. However, what has not been explored is the extent to which the practice of the rites contributes to a meaningful life that is comparable to some Western conceptions of meaningfulness. Through surveying the conception of meaningfulness given by Susan Wolf, this paper aims to show that the practice of the rites in the *Xunzi* has both objective and subjective values that are necessary for rendering a life meaningful. Furthermore, the practice of the rites resolves the tension that arises in contemporary Western discussions of meaningfulness regarding the choice between being moral and satisfying self-interest, thus leading one to live a flourishing life.

## 1. Introduction

Albert Camus starts his *Myth of Sisyphus* dealing with what he thinks is the most urgent of all philosophical problems—suicide, for if one judges life to have no significance, then nothing else matters.<sup>1</sup> In response to this urgency, contemporary philosophers have come up with various approaches to address the issue of meaning in life, including both supernaturalism and naturalism.<sup>2</sup> While supernaturalism rests the meaning of life on a supernatural being such as God, naturalism suggests that human beings can have a meaningful life without assuming the existence of any supernatural entity. The naturalist approach can be further divided into two main branches, subjectivism and objectivism, which are mainly distinguished based on the issue of whether an objective standard, rather than one’s subjective desires, is necessary for a life to be meaningful. During such discussions, there arises a tension between living a moral life and satisfying one’s

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<sup>1</sup> Camus (2005), p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed survey on different approaches addressing the meaning of life suggested by contemporary philosophers, see Metz (2001, 2002, 2015).

self-interests; as such, Susan Wolf puts forward an approach that combines both subjective and objective values. The quest for a meaningful life in the contemporary Western tradition, as suggested by Thaddeus Metz, is a quest for “a significant existence”—not only does this quest of meaningfulness seek the value of life, but the solution to this quest also suggests how people should live in this world, in contrast to living a happy and moral life.<sup>3</sup>

Although early Confucians (Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi) lacked a systematic analysis of the conception of meaningful life, it is undeniable that they were concerned with how one should orient oneself in a chaotic world in order to live a good life. Richard Kim and Joshua W. Seachris suggest that Confucius’s emphasis on rituals [the rites] (*li* 禮) and the value of family allows one to live a meaningful life with purpose and significance.<sup>4</sup> Apart from encouraging a sense of purpose and significance, I suggest that the practice of the rites and the value of family as expressed in the *Xunzi* also provides people guidance as to how one should live in this world, and it is in this sense that the practice of the rites contributes meaning to one’s life. Xunzi is of particular interest in this paper because of his views towards human nature (*xing* 性). On the one hand, he contends that human beings are born with various desires and are driven to satisfy their own interests, without regard for public interest. On the other hand, he argues that everyone is capable of becoming a moral agent living harmoniously in society through learning and practicing the rites. This seemingly contrasting view towards human nature can be viewed as representing the contrasting views of subjectivism and objectivism. With the help of the conception of meaningfulness given by Susan Wolf, this paper aims to show that the practice of the rites in the *Xunzi* may shed some light on how to reconcile the tensions between morality and self-interest, and allow one to live a meaningful life.

## **2. Susan Wolf on “Subjective Attraction” and “Objective Attractiveness”**

Although the subjectivist and objectivist approaches are prominent in Western contemporary discussions of the meaning of (and in) life, Susan Wolf finds both of them inadequate. The subjectivist approach focuses on the satisfaction of self-interest, and claims that one’s life is meaningful provided that

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<sup>3</sup> Metz (2001), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> Kim and Seachris (2018), p. 1-9.

one is pursuing what interests them; as Metz puts it, “subjectivism maintains that what is meaningful for a given person is a function of that toward which she (or her group) has (or would have) a certain pro-attitude”.<sup>5</sup> This conception of meaningfulness is well represented by a picture of the passionate Sisyphus suggested by Richard Taylor. According to the myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus was punished by God and forced to roll a boulder up to the top of a hill. When he had almost finished the job, the stone would roll down, and Sisyphus had to start rolling the boulder up from the bottom of the hill again and again, for all eternity, without any aim. Many would agree with Taylor that Sisyphus’s toil is a paradigm of an objectively meaningless life—a picture of “endless pointlessness”.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, if this picture of Sisyphus represents the condition of human existence, is it possible for human beings to find subjective value in their existence? Taylor concludes that if Sisyphus found “inflicted on him the irrational desire to be doing just what he found himself doing,” then his life would be meaningful, despite the fact he is not going to achieve anything with objective value.<sup>7</sup> Taylor dismisses the need for objective value in a meaningful life, for pursuing goals with objective value would result in the “Paradox of the End,” as illustrated by Iddo Landau:

We set ourselves ends and strive to achieve them. We hope that their attainment will improve our condition. The closer we get to our goals, the happier we feel. Paradoxically, however, when we finally do achieve them our joy is sometimes diminished. We have a sense of insignificance and emptiness, and we feel that in attaining our goal we have lost the meaningfulness and balance we experienced while we were striving towards it. In some ways, it seems to us, the struggle is more gratifying than the achievement of the end.<sup>8</sup>

Even if the goals that Sisyphus pursues have objective value, if he pursues one goal after another, it would be no different from his punishment as he is still endlessly and aimlessly pursuing different goals. If we are to find meaning in the life of a Sisyphus who is keen on pursuing goals, it will be in his will to pursue his

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<sup>5</sup> Metz (2001), p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor (2000), p. 325.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>8</sup> Landau (1995), p. 555.

goals and his struggle to achieve something significant, rather than the significance of the goals themselves. In other words, it is his pro-attitude that makes his life meaningful, rather than the objective value.

Wolf finds it indisputable that having passion, or finding fulfilment in what one is doing, is necessary for a life to be meaningful. It is not difficult to find people who do not enjoy their life and thus conclude that life is meaningless, such as the alienated housewives mentioned by Peter Singer in his book *How Are We to Live?*<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Wolf points out that Taylor's view on meaningfulness would lead to an absurd consequence. What if someone finds passion in "counting or recounting the number of tiles on the bathroom floor"?<sup>10</sup> According to Taylor's conception, that person would have a meaningful life as long as they find the activity fulfilling; however, this does not seem to fit our common conception of meaningfulness. In fact, Wolf suggests that that person may be mistaken in their belief in what counts as meaningful.

However, a life dedicated to pursuing only objective value, and moral value in particular, may be undesirable as well. In her article entitled "Moral Saints," Wolf argues that the life of moral saints, whether deontological or utilitarian, are unattractive. These people would devote themselves to categorical duties or maximizing happiness while neglecting their own interests. They may not be able to enjoy non-moral interests (such as reading and playing violin), nor could they develop their non-moral talents (such as athletic talents and musical talents), for practical reasons. Given their dominating moral characters, they would require themselves to be fully dedicated to their moral duties and thereby disregard any non-moral characters and activities. Even if they allowed themselves to enjoy those activities, such pursuits would only be seen as instrumental in achieving their moral duties. More significantly, these non-moral interests, talents and characters are essential components of our identity, and suppressing them may result in the loss of personal self.<sup>11</sup> In sum, the life of moral saints would be "strangely barren".<sup>12</sup>

Although Wolf argues that an objective value is necessary (unlike other scholars such as Peter Singer, who defines objective value as something "larger than the self"),<sup>13</sup> she nonetheless leaves its definition opaque. Singer argues that it

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<sup>9</sup> Wolf (2013), p. 306.

<sup>10</sup> Wolf (1997), p. 218-219.

<sup>11</sup> Wolf (1982), p. 420-424.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 421.

<sup>13</sup> Singer (1995), p. 213.

is only through living for purposes larger than oneself that one can avoid the undesirable results that arise from living with only subjective value—emptiness and dissatisfaction. For those who live with only subjective value, the validation of value always comes from within oneself, so one could never know whether one is doing something significant. Eventually, one would come to doubt why one wanted to pursue any activity in the first place and find oneself trapped in a vicious circle. It is through participating in something with objective value that one can avoid begging the question and find justification for continuing to engage in their activities.<sup>14</sup>

However, despite the fact that objective value could help to break the vicious circle, and no matter how significant one's impact is in this world, the existence of human beings is still insignificant from the perspective of the universe. Sooner or later, the universe will be destroyed and no conscious beings will be left to appreciate the significance of human existence. Singer's view thus exposes a problem in discussions of the meaning of life, where a life that is (ethically) objectively meaningful may still be objectively meaningless from the perspective of the universe.<sup>15</sup>

In this respect, the opaque meaning of objective value given by Susan Wolf helps to solve this problem. Wolf believes it is of importance to include objectivity in the conception of a meaningful life as a solution for reconciling the discrepancy between the perspective of the universe and that of individuals. If one believes that one's interests are the only important things within one's life and strives only for one's own satisfaction, one would be devastated to learn the fact that the universe is indifferent to one's interests, and that there is no point in striving towards any achievement since we will all die one day. As it is one's solipsistic attitude that causes this discordance when one is confronted with the perspective of the universe, Wolf thus emphasises the importance of harmonising these perspectives. To adopt an objective value is to recognise the fact that there exist other perspectives beyond one's own. More importantly, these other perspectives are as equally important as one's own and might be “indifferent to whether one exists at all”.<sup>16</sup> Through acknowledging the existence of these perspectives, one realises “the fact that one is not the center of the universe”,<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.206-213.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed explanation of different perspectives of meaningfulness, see Benatar (2017).

<sup>16</sup> Wolf (2013), p. 312.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

which aligns with the perspective of the universe and enables one to carry on with one's life. To Wolf, this facet of an objective value in the conception of meaningfulness means more to an individual than leaving an impact on the world.

If we emphasise the perspective of the universe in discussing the meaning of life, we eventually come to the conclusion that all activities are equally meaningful as long as it is one's will to pursue them, for nothing really matters to the universe. This subjectivist interpretation of meaningfulness is so broad that it would include lives that are generally regarded as meaningless, such as the lives of people who are passionate about doing crossword puzzles, or counting the number of tiles on the bathroom floor.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, if we give priority to objective value, one's self-interest in living a good life may be neglected. Wolf's conception of meaningfulness is of significance in that it allows us to live a good life, while at the same time reminding us of the importance of objectivity. It is the synthesis of both subjectivist and objectivist points of view. The implication is that the kinds of activities one engages in are not important unless they cultivate a sense of objectivity, such that people are prevented from being self-centred. As such, meaningful lives can involve individuals living harmoniously with others within a community, and activities that render lives meaningful can be those that cultivate the virtues necessary for a person to successfully engage in social relationships. With this conception of meaningfulness, I will look into the practice of the rites advocated by Xunzi, and show that participating in the practice of the rites contributes to a meaningful life.

### **3. An Account of Meaningful Life in the *Xunzi***

Instead of asking why human beings exist in this world, Xunzi was more concerned with how one ought to live in this world, a concern that aligns with the conception of meaningfulness from the perspective of individuals. For Xunzi, this question amounts to how to be a virtuous person and establish a harmonious society in response to the human condition. Xunzi contends that there are certain facts about human beings and that we must respond to them in order to flourish. First and foremost, human beings are social animals that must live within a society. Furthermore, they are born with various desires and are driven to satisfy them. However, if human beings are allowed to pursue their desires to satisfaction

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<sup>18</sup> Wolf (1997), p. 218.

without limit, neither their desires nor the society's resources can be sustained. Moreover, Xunzi asserts that although human beings are born with the *potential* to learn to be moral, they are not born with incipient moral capacities and thus they must learn to become moral agents—human nature can be beautified. In response to these facts, social conventions (known as the rites) are thus established to ensure the proper allocation of resources and to guide human beings to become virtuous. It is only when a harmonious society is established and human nature is refined through joyous practice of the rites that human beings are able to flourish. The “objective attractiveness” of practicing the rites thus lies in its contribution to the organization of a functional, wealthy and harmonious society, as well as the beautification of human nature. Through the practice, one is not only attending to one's own interests, but also at the same time orienting oneself to perspectives that are as equally important as one's own. At the same time, its “subjective attraction” lies in the joy found in performing the rites.

One way to establish a functional, wealthy and harmonious society is to install a hierarchical social institution through assigning proper stations to people according to their capacities and abilities. Xunzi asserts that all human beings, whether they are noble or not, are born with various desires and are driven to satisfy them.<sup>19</sup> For instance, people desire food when hungry, warmth when cold, and rest when tired. They also desire not to be harmed, and seek out profit or self-interests (Knoblock, 4.9).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, they are distinguished from other animals in that they are able to form societies and utilise myriad things. Nonetheless, once they start to live together, they fight each other over limited resources, and disorder results (Knoblock, 9.16a; 10.1; 10.4; 19.1a; 23.1a). The rites are thus established in response to these facts about humanity and prescribe a hierarchical system within a society. As Xunzi notes, it is impossible for every person within the same society to be equal in power and influence, otherwise the society would not be functional. If everyone was the ruler, then there would be no officials to carry out their commands. By the same token, it is impossible for everyone to work in the same profession (Knoblock, 4.12; 9.3; 9.15; 10.4). A person who is fit to be a farmer may not do well as the director of the fields, and the same is true for other positions (Knoblock, 21.6b). It is thus of importance to divide people into different professions and social classes according to their

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that the word “noble” here refers to people who are virtuous, rather than a social class. The Chinese term for “noble person” is 君子 (*junzi*).

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all citations of Xunzi are taken from Knoblock (1988).

abilities, age and virtues.

This hierarchical system also defines the responsibilities of each position to ensure that each person performs their duties accordingly, where the lord acts as a lord, and farmers act as farmers (Knoblock, 4.12; 9.15). Once a social hierarchy has been established, resources can be allocated according to the various positions and emoluments. Lower officials should only use resources that are assigned to their positions, and they should not desire that which is not assigned to their positions, nor should they desire more than prescribed by their social status—otherwise, chaos would result and society could not prosper (Knoblock, 10.1). In this sense, the rites also prescribe the proper objects of desire (Knoblock, 19.1b). To summarise, through assigning proper stations to each person within a society and allocating resources accordingly, the rites lay down the foundation for a functional and affluent society. More importantly, people with different talents are able to flourish within this society. Through practicing the rites, one is not only able to satisfy their own interests, but also contribute to the moral order within a society that enables others to flourish.<sup>21</sup>

Once a society is formed, human beings engage in various relations, such as the relations between lord and minister, parents and children, husbands and wives, and amongst siblings and friends. As long as a person is engaged in a human relation, one assumes the duties specified by that relation (Knoblock, 9.15). At the same time, one is required to possess certain virtues in order to perform these duties properly. For instance, being a minister is to serve one's lord, which requires respect and loyalty; being a child is to carry out filial obligations as required by the parent-child relation, of which filial piety is necessary. It is through the practice of the rites that the virtues of respect, loyalty and filial piety as such are cultivated.

Take the general principles of mourning as an example. First and foremost,

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<sup>21</sup> The social hierarchical system thus established is a just system, though not in the sense of the Rawlsian conception of justice as fairness, where everyone should be allowed to have equal opportunities despite the social positions they are born in. The aim of this hierarchical system is instead to sustain both the production of resources and the satisfaction of desires through securing a division of labour within a society. The inauguration of social classes is not arbitrary, but must be done using the capacity of righteousness (*I* 義), which is unique to human beings. According to Xunzi, if the classes are divided with the capacity of righteousness, a harmonious society can be achieved and resources can be utilised properly (Knoblock, 9.16a). Furthermore, as Antonio Cua (2003) points out, Xunzi is well aware of two different kinds of “honors”—the honor gained because of the virtues one possesses, and the honor gained by virtue of the social class one is born in (147–202). It is the honor gained through being a virtuous person that is of significance, and positions of higher officials should be held by virtuous persons.

the mourning rites define various human relationships. In the case of the extreme pain and grief that results from the death of one's lord or parents, the mourning period is extended to three years so as to ensure enough time is given for the mourner to express their pain and grief. In contrast, the periods of mourning for other relations last no more than nine months. Through the distinction in the mourning period among various relations, the obligations accompanying the relations are thus defined (Knoblock, 19.5b, 19.9a; 19.9c; 19.10). Mourning in accordance with the rites is to perform one last duty to the deceased, so that one's respect to one's lord or one's honour to one's parent is expressed without reservation, which in turn requires the demonstration of virtues (the minister's loyalty to the lord and the child's filial piety to their parent) (Knoblock, 19.4a). Virtues such as loyalty, faithfulness, love and reverence are cultivated and expressed to the highest through the sacrifices employed in the mourning rites (Knoblock, 19.11). The funeral also brings together the feudal lords and government officials (in the case of the emperor) and distant relatives (in the case of an ordinary person). Given the amount of time required for the preparation of the funeral, even those who live far away are able to attend the funeral to show their loyalty and respect (Knoblock, 19.4b-c). Last but not least, since the proper expression of emotions in various situations is a sign that one is observing one's duties as required by a particular relation, the rites also prescribe how and what kind of emotions one should express as required by the situation. For instance, the funeral rites prescribe how the deceased should be adorned to ensure the proper expression of emotions. If the deceased is not adorned properly, no grief can be expressed; this implies that one is not performing one's duty as a child properly and that one is not showing respect and love towards one's parent (Knoblock, 19.5a). The rites are therefore important in maintaining human relations: practicing them not only defines various human relations and the duties that flow from such relations, but also cultivates virtues that are necessary for performing those duties and provides a proper means for people to express their emotions properly. In sum, through such practice, one does not only satisfy one's self-interest, but also eventually becomes a virtuous person.

Because they install social institutions and prescribe the proper expression of emotions through defining human relations, the rites are said to be able to beautify human nature. Xunzi's assertion that human nature is evil is made in response to Mencius's claim that humans are born with innate incipient moral capacities—the four moral sprouts. For Xunzi, human nature refers to capacities that humans are

born with and can be exercised without learning, such as the capacities of seeing and hearing, as well as the desire for profits and pleasure. Moral acts, by contrast, are acquired through conscious exertion (*wei* 偽). Xunzi draws an analogy between a warped board and human nature. Human effort such as press-framing, steaming and force must be applied if the warped board is to be made straight, which indicates the fact that the board is not straight by nature. By the same reasoning, since human beings must learn and practice the rites if they are to act morally and to bring order to a society, it can be shown that acting morally is not human nature (Knoblock, 23.3c).<sup>22</sup> Thus, instead of being executed by calling upon the innate capacities within oneself, moral acts are performed under the guidance of the rites, and hence humans must exert their own effort in order to be moral. For instance, human beings have the desire to eat when starving, and they will fight others over food. Hence, deference to one's parents would not be possible without learning (Knoblock, 23.1c–d). Furthermore, Xunzi has observed that human relations are often seen as instrumental: once individuals set up their own family, they may cease to observe filial obligations; once they have satisfied their desires, they may no longer be faithful to their friends and lords. Once their desires are satisfied, human beings would fail to observe their obligations as required by various relations and he thus concludes that their nature is ugly (*bu mei* 不美) (Knoblock, 23.6a).

It is in the consequentialist sense that the rites are able to transform human desires and bring order to a society, and it is in the non-consequentialist sense that the practice of the rites marks the distinction between human beings and beasts that the rites are said to be able to beautify human nature. From a consequentialist point of view, humans are no longer driven by their immediate desires and social order can be maintained within a society. As the rites define social classes and allocate resources accordingly, human desires are refined in such a way that are appropriate to their social status, and humans are allowed to satisfy their refined desires through proper means prescribed in the rites. For instance, with the help of the noble persons, ordinary people would be able to taste fine food such as rice

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<sup>22</sup> For this section, my interpretation on the Chinese text is different from that of Knoblock. Part of Knoblock's translation of this section is "since the nature of man is evil, it must await the government of the sage kings and the transformation effected by ritual and morality before everything develops with good order and is consistent with the good," where "the nature of man is evil" becomes a premise rather than a conclusion. However, I contend that Xunzi aims to show that humans are not good by nature with the help of an analogy with the warped board in this section, and hence I do not follow Knoblock's translation here. I still include Knoblock's section for reference.

and meat and come to desire them. Furthermore, although it is a fact that human beings want to indulge in immediate luxury, they nonetheless also want their wealth to perpetuate, and thus they are willing to lead the life prescribed by the rites in order to obtain their new objects of desire (Knoblock, 4.9-4.11).<sup>23</sup> As human beings form new desires and have them satisfied in accordance with the rites, they no longer fight against each other for resources, and societal chaos is thus prevented.

From a non-consequentialist point of view, human nature is refined in such a way that they are distinguished from beasts. Despite the fact that Xunzi calls for a transformation of nature, for human beings to learn to become moral agents, he does not renounce their inborn nature. Xunzi asserts that even ancient sage kings were born with the same inborn nature as those of ordinary people, and hence human beings are not evil by virtue of their inborn nature. Nonetheless, human beings should not leave their inborn nature uncultivated (*lou* 陋); they should strive to render their nature complete through the practice of the rites (Knoblock, 4.9, 19.6). This is not only for the benefit of a society, but also because such practice is the beauty itself that marks the distinction between humans and beasts. Take funeral rites as an example again. Xunzi asserts that as long as they have awareness (*zhi* 知), even animals and birds will grieve the loss of their mates. Since human beings are superior among those that have awareness, if they do not grieve as the beasts do, they do not even amount to beasts (Knoblock, 19.5a, 19.9b). As it is the inborn nature of both human beings and beasts to have various emotions, what distinguishes them from each other is the proper expression of emotions, which can only be achieved through the practice of the rites. Through employing various rituals in a funeral, emotions are expressed neither in excess nor deficiency, but are appropriate for one's relations with the deceased (Knoblock, 19.5b). Moreover, it is only through the practice of funeral rites that one would be able to extend one's relationship with the deceased. If their loved ones die in the morning, beasts forget their relations by evening; however, relations among human beings continue to constitute a significant part of their lives even after their loved ones have departed. Through practicing the funeral rites, human beings are able to extend their remembrance—as well as their loyalty,

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<sup>23</sup> It would be another project to look into the question of how it is possible for human beings to transform their nature and how is it possible for the ancient kings to establish the rites in the first place. However, as this paper focuses on why practicing the rites could lead one to live a meaningful life, I do not intend to discuss this matter in this paper. For further details on this topic, see, for example, Chong (2008), Cua (2005), Fung (2012), Hagen (2007), Kline III and Ivanhoe (2000), and Lee (2005).

faithfulness, love and reverence—to the deceased and continue their relations (Knoblock, 19.4c, 19.11). As such, human beings are reminded of the intrinsic value of human relations and are willing to observe their duties even if their desires have been satisfied through such relations. In this sense, human nature is said to be beautified and is no longer ugly.

The reason why transcending one's animal self confers meaning to the lives of human beings can be explained in terms of Metz's fundamentality theory. The fundamentality theory states that "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",<sup>24</sup> where "fundamental conditions of human existence" refers to "conditions that are largely responsible for many other conditions in a given domain [a living human person, human life as a collective, and the environment in which humans live]".<sup>25</sup> It is a theory of self-transcendence that focuses on moving beyond one's animal self through the exercise of one's rationality, such that not only are one's decisions and volition rational, but also one's conation, affection and emotions are responsive to reason.<sup>26</sup> The practice of the rites is an exercise of rationality, where one refines one's desires and emotions such that they are expressed as required by the situation (in other words, rationality is oriented to the fundamental condition in the domain of a living human person). At the same time, through the practice, people are assigned to stations that are appropriate to their talents and virtues, such that each person is able to perform their duties accordingly and society is kept wealthy and functional. As such, on top of the satisfaction of one's own desires, the desires of others can also be sustained. At the same time, virtues that are other-regarding, such as respect, loyalty, deference, and love are cultivated and human relations are sustained (in other words, rationality is oriented to the fundamental condition in the domain of human life as a collective). Through maintaining a harmonious society, the practice of the rites contributes to an environment that enables the flourishing of all (that is, rationality is oriented to the fundamental condition in the domain of the environment in which humans live).

If the "objective attractiveness" of practicing the rites lies in its function in bringing about an ordered society and distinguishing humans from beasts, the

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<sup>24</sup> Metz (2015), 222.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>26</sup> Metz (2011), p. 495.

“subjective attraction” is manifested in the joy one experiences during the practice. It may be argued that if morality is not part of the inborn nature of human beings, and if the rites consist of rules and norms that assign people to different stations and prescribe duties (and even the expression of emotions associated with various human relations), it is impossible to find any “subjective attraction” in following such practices, for the rites are mere external sanctions. Furthermore, if the rites only prescribe behaviors, and if the question of whether one is performing the rites properly can only be judged by one’s behaviors, why does it matter if one is subjectively attracted to such a practice? While it is possible that one may simply follow the procedures without truly understanding them, the practice is not genuine if one does not express one’s emotions sincerely during the practice. At the same time, if one expresses one’s emotions without following the rites, one would harm oneself. It is only when one performs the rites and shows the appropriate emotions that the practice is authentic (Knoblock, 19.3). Being authentic to the practice of the rites requires one to see the beauty and intrinsic value of the practice, and those who are able to truly appreciate the rationale behind them would perform the rites without exerting themselves and truly take joy in the practice (Knoblock, 19.2d, 21.7d). In other words, the rites cannot be said to be properly performed if one is not engaged in the practice.

#### **4. Conclusion: What Can Xunzi’s Conception of Meaningfulness Contribute to Modern Societies?**

In this paper I have shown that the practice of the rites promoted by Xunzi could lead one to live a meaningful life in the sense of meaningfulness given by Susan Wolf, where both subjective and objective values are necessary for a life to be meaningful. I have shown that the practice of the rites has objective value. Through practising the rites and aiming for the establishment of a harmonious society, human beings are turned away from selfishness and oriented to a perspective that is indifferent to their self-interests. Furthermore, instead of leaving the objective value opaque, Xunzi’s conception of meaningfulness provides a clear picture of what counts as objective values—transcending one’s animal self and striving for the beautification of human nature. With the help of the rites, emotions are properly expressed and virtues are developed to maintain human relations. The beautification of human nature has objective value and is intrinsically valuable in that it marks the distinction between humans and beasts.

The subjective value of the practice of the rites lies in one's engagement and enjoyment in the practice.

While promoting the achievement of perfection in such performances, the practice of the rites also emphasises the importance of taking delight in them, and the practice itself is a manifestation of the completion of human nature. As such, another advantage of practicing the rites is that it solves the Paradox of the End. The major problem mentioned in the Paradox of the End is that people experience emptiness after achieving their goals, and would rather continue with their struggles. This problem arises when there is a clear distinction between means and ends, and that one desires only the ends. For instance, imagine that Sisyphus is keen on building a temple but has no interest in rolling boulders. Thus, the only reason for Sisyphus to keep rolling the boulder would be his interest in achieving his end. Seeing the act of rolling the boulder as only a means and not something that he desires, he would be caught in a dilemma: he should try to achieve his goal because it is what he wants, but at the same time he should not achieve it since he would lose a sense of purposefulness and significance after it is achieved.<sup>27</sup> One of the solutions to the Paradox of the End is to eliminate the distinction between means and ends, where "the activity transcends the means/end categories".<sup>28</sup> The practice of the rites is said to be able to solve the Paradox of the End in this sense. One does not only enjoy the practice, but during the practice, one transcends one's animal self and renders one's nature complete.

It may be objected that the rites are not applicable to the contemporary world. After all, it is not feasible to spend three years on mourning even if one loves one's parents deeply. At the same time, a hierarchical society is against the modern spirit of justice, such as that presented by Rawls. In response to this objection, it is true that the rites that were written around two thousand years ago are not applicable to modern societies. Nonetheless, it is the principle (*li* 理) that is important. As Xunzi has mentioned, the details of the rites may change over time in response to the changing environment, while the principle remains the same (Knoblock, 17.11). The principle of the rites is to establish a harmonious society in response to the fact that human beings are social animals and are driven by their immediate desires. Indeed, the human condition has not changed drastically for the past two thousand years. Whether in the past or present, human beings are still living in societies and are still driven by their

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<sup>27</sup> Landau (1995), p. 556-557.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 563.

desires, while resources are increasingly limited. In this respect, although the rules written in the rites are no longer applicable, Xunzi's emphasis on the cultivation of other-regarding virtues that enable one to maintain human relations is still valuable and significant in modern societies, for human relations are unavoidable when human beings are living in a society. By all means, if Rawls's principle of justice is proved to be more suitable in contemporary times, Xunzi would not object to it.

Xunzi's emphasis on human relations is thus subject to another criticism: the account of meaningful life found in the *Xunzi* focuses only on partial relations, which ignores the impartiality that is advocated by most modern moral principles, especially utilitarianism. The utilitarian may take a position similar to that of the Mohist. Instead of spending resources on the practice of the rites, which aims to maintain partial relations (lord and minister, parents and children, husbands and wives, and amongst siblings and friends), resources should be distributed in such a way that maximizes the happiness (or welfare) of a society, disregarding partiality. Take the modern movement of effective altruism as an example. Being an effective altruist is not simply to maximise happiness in this world, but to adopt the most effective way of doing so. For instance, instead of going to a distant country and helping people in need, one should probably work in a career that allows them to make as much money as possible; in doing so, one would be able to donate as much money as possible, allowing for the hiring of more aid workers and saving more people's lives as a result.<sup>29</sup> It may be suggested that by participating in effective altruism, one is still able to maintain partial relations in order to maximize *effectiveness*. Nonetheless, these partial relations would then be seen as means only. Xunzi would argue that these partial relations have intrinsic value in that they enable human beings to transcend their animal self. For Xunzi, to engage in partial relations requires the exercise of rationality, which orients one's cognition and affection to other persons, and hence the engagement itself is intrinsically good. To treat partial relations as means only is to neglect our human nature and render human beings as mere beasts. Furthermore, being an effective altruist also means using oneself as merely a means to an end, which neglects one's self-interests.<sup>30</sup> I contend that the problem of the meaning of life is a problem that must involve self-interest: an

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed introduction to effective altruism, see Singer (2015).

<sup>30</sup> For an analysis of the meaning of life and utilitarianism as well as its criticisms, see Metz (2003).

interest for one to continue living.<sup>31</sup> As Camus has put it nicely, if one judges that life is not worth living for *oneself*, there is no reason for *that person* to continue living. Even though Mother Teresa may still have a meaningful life, I would have no reason for *me* to continue living if a computer programme could do a better job in eradicating poverty than me. The matter of the meaning of life is thus by default a matter of satisfying one's interest in continuing one's life.

The above discussion on effective altruism also reveals a tension between self-interest, morality and meaningfulness. It seems that while being moral would probably lead to a meaningful life, one's self-interest would be considerably compromised. Nonetheless, if one focuses on the satisfaction of one's self-interests, one is unlikely to live a meaningful life in the eyes of the others. I maintain that the practice of the rites could reconcile this tension. On the one hand, one's interests are satisfied and one is able to rejoice in participating in partial relations by following the practice. On the other hand, one eventually becomes a virtuous person and contributes to the development of a harmonious society and enables the flourishing of others.

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<sup>31</sup> One may argue that this may not be true for those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for some purpose. For example, parents are often willing to sacrifice their lives in order to save their children, and in a case mentioned by Mencius, a person may be willing to sacrifice themselves in order to maintain their integrity and righteousness. In these cases, I would claim that these people are taking those things that they have sacrificed for as part of their self-interests, and have weighted them as being more valuable than their own lives. The parents take the well-being of their children as part of their own interests, while the person in Mencius's case takes their integrity and righteousness as part of their self-interests too—for them, it is better to die than to live with dishonour. The idea of 'an interest in whether one should continue living' may be comparable to David Benatar's (2017) notion of 'an interest in continuing to exist' in his discussion of suicide.

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## Meaning of Life and Nonsense in *Tractatus*

### No Answer for No Question and Some Fictional Illuminations

Isabel G. Gamero Cabrera\*

#### Abstract

In this paper I clarify Wittgenstein's position on meaning of life as exposed in *Tractatus*, and the related questions about the nonsensical and the ineffable. The problem is as follows: if there is a question that cannot be expressed, does it mean that there is no answer to it or rather that the answers are nonsensical? In order to address this issue, I develop my arguments in three parts: in the first step, I explain Wittgenstein's thesis about the meaning of life as exposed in *Tractatus*, with an especial emphasis on the notions of nonsense and ineffability. In the second one, I go beyond Wittgenstein's explanation in the *Tractatus* and refer to its two possible interpretations: the resolute and the illuminating ones, evaluating their plausibility and accuracy. Lastly, I provide some fictional examples in order to illustrate my explanation and to show, indirectly, what according to Wittgenstein cannot be said.

**Keywords:** meaning of life, nonsense, absurd, ineffable, mystical, existential crisis

#### 1. Meaning of life in the *Tractatus*

In this section, I explain Wittgenstein's conception of the "meaning of life" in his *Tractatus*, merely for expositive purposes. In his *Tractatus*<sup>1</sup>, first published in 1917, the Austrian philosopher stated that the questions about the meaning of life (among others, why do we exist? What is the point of being alive? Why are we here, alive, instead of dead?) cannot be formulated. The reason of this thesis is that the only kind of problems that human beings can define and solve are the problems of natural science (T4.11). These problems refer to physical facts, which are studied and solved by chemistry, biology... The main feature of answerable questions and their answers is that all of them are

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<sup>1</sup> The *Tractatus* is quoted as T, followed by aphorism.

measurable, quantitative and objective, contrastable by experience and common to all human being.

However, and this is the main difficulty this inquiry faces, Wittgenstein also stated that even if all possible scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would have not been touched at all (T6.52). That is, scientific research can provide answers to problems such as the composition of a material, when and how the Earth became the Earth, when dinosaurs disappeared, decode the DNA and similar... However, no scientific investigation will answer metaphysical queries, questions related with our beliefs or our feelings, etc. For metaphysical questions are beyond science, they cannot be formulated or solved by any quantitative and measurable method. It is also possible that different human beings have different answers to these questions, so there is no an only and unique answer to them. Moreover, Wittgenstein stated they cannot be answered, because our language is insufficient to express them. Our scientific, objective and quantitative methods cannot grasp them either. These questions belong to what cannot be said: the ineffable.

In order to understand properly Wittgenstein's position on the ineffable, it is important to notice that according to the *Tractatus* the meaning of life is not the only question that cannot be formulated. In this category Wittgenstein also included the question about what a properly correct action is or the classic Kantian question concerning the existence of the World (LE, 6-8)<sup>2</sup>. There also pertain religious questions (on God's existence, life after death; the reality of miracles and similar); ethical questions about the Good (what it is the absolute value, or the experience of feeling absolutely safe..., LE, p. 8); aesthetical questions (if there is absolute beauty...) and, in short, all the metaphysical issues, which ask about the meaning of "being", "absolute"; or give a different, not every-day use, to terms such as "to be" or "good".

In another text, Wittgenstein summarised the main difficulty of such metaphysical questions with this explanation:

“[...] As long as there is a verb 'to be' that looks as though it functions in the same way as 'to eat' and 'to drink'; as long as we still have the adjectives 'identical', 'true', 'false', 'possible'; as long as we continue to talk of a 'river of time' and an 'expanse of space', etc., people will keep

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<sup>2</sup> The "Lecture on Ethics" are quoted as LE, followed by number of page.

stumbling over the same cryptic difficulties and staring at something that no explanation seems capable of clearing up” (CV, 22, MS 111 133: 24.8.1931)<sup>3</sup>.

There is a mistake then when we, human beings, understand and use the verb ‘to be’ as any other verb, or when we think that adjectives such as ‘identical’ or ‘true’ are of the same kind as ‘red’ or ‘big’. The main problem of metaphysical questions is that they have a similar appearance to other questions, but are quite different and can neither be expressed by everyday language nor be solved with scientific methods. Thus, according to Wittgenstein, the query about the meaning of life and all the aforementioned questions cannot be expressed or answered.

It is not exaggerated to consider that, despite his two different periods, Wittgenstein tried to face the difficulties related to these metaphysical questions thorough his entire work. In order to avoid complexity and address one single topic, in this paper I will refer exclusively to the question of the meaning of life in Wittgenstein’s first period, that is, in the *Tractatus*. However, I would like to make clear that, although he defined a different approach to philosophy in his later period, these questions were still of his interest in his late work, as it is going to be mentioned in the final section of this paper.

Another complexity of the early Wittgenstein’s arguments (which will be addressed below, especially in the second section) is that the *Tractatus* itself is composed by metaphysical questions, which are, therefore, ineffable and close to nonsense. That is, Wittgenstein’s first book is an example of these inexpressible questions that cannot be expressed or answered. However, I do not want to anticipate the problems of Wittgenstein’s argumentation before explaining it.

As it has been already stated, according to the *Tractatus*, metaphysical questions are not problems of natural science, because they cannot be formulated or answered (T4.11). That is, the question about the meaning of life (and other philosophical questions related) cannot be formulated. Our words are not enough to express them and when we try to refer to them, we speak nonsense.

The problem is then, and it is the main question of this paper, as follows: if

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<sup>3</sup> *Culture and Value* is quoted as CV, followed by number of page, number of manuscript and date.

these questions cannot be expressed, does it mean that there is no answer to them?

Not really, according to Wittgenstein, for when all scientific problems were solved, there would be no question left, and “just this is the answer” (T6.52). That is, Wittgenstein found the solution to the problem of life (and to the related metaphysical questions) in the vanishing of the problem itself (T6.521).

According to his argumentation, the problem of life, and all our worries about it, simply disappears when we become aware that we cannot express or formulate it with our language. As human beings we experience and face this impossibility, especially when we try to refer with our words to the ineffable. In his “Lecture on Ethics”, Wittgenstein explained this impossibility with the following metaphor: it is like an absolutely hopelessly “running against the walls of our cage”. However, Wittgenstein also considered this impossible search as a tendency in the human mind, which he respected deeply and would never ridicule (LE 12).

In other words: we face the impossibility of speaking about what cannot be said and, sometimes, we have lived or experienced this impossibility. For this same reason, Wittgenstein maintained that we can understand something that we cannot express (T6.521). Coming to this understanding and realising that we cannot speak about these topics is, according to this author, the only solution to this problem.

Therefore, meaning of life cannot be expressed, it is what Wittgenstein calls “a mystical feeling” (T6.45), which cannot be said, just shown (T6.522). Moreover, whoever has understood this meaning cannot explain it (T6.521), cannot put it into understandable words. It is the ineffable.

He gives yet another clue to understand this idea: the question about the meaning of life cannot be formulated in our language. Therefore, the riddle does not exist, because if a question cannot be formulated, it cannot be answered either (T6.51). As the meaning of life is a question that cannot be formulated, we just understand it when we accept that it is inexpressible. It is more a mystical feeling than a fact, it is (again) the ineffable.

In a second step of his explanation, Wittgenstein proposes a method to elucidate this kind of metaphysical questions. The method is “to say nothing

except what can be said” and when someone wishes to say something metaphysical, demonstrate to him that he has given no meaning to certain signs in his propositions (T6.53).

The *Tractatus* serves then as an elucidation of metaphysical problems: who understands this book, recognizes its aphorisms as “nonsense” (*Unsinn*). Then, he has surmounted these propositions and sees the World rightly. (T6.54). But at this point he cannot explain what he has understood; and if he dared to speak about it, his words would become nonsense.

A terminological clarification to explain this argument properly<sup>4</sup>: in the *Tractatus*, “senseless” (*Sinnlos*) means something empty of meaning, meaningless or tautological (such as: ‘A=A’). It is the limit of logic and sense (T4.461). It is not understandable because there is nothing to understand. It has no content. On the other hand, “nonsense” (*Unsinn*) means absurd, a paradoxical content that is beyond the limits of the reasonable and understandable for human beings. While logical propositions are senseless, philosophical propositions and the queries on the meaning of the life are nonsensical (T4.0031). Once someone has understood that philosophical contents and the questions about the meaning of life are nonsensical contents that are limited by the empty bounds of logic, he can finally avoid referring to these nonsensical topics and sees the World rightly (T6.54). He has, Wittgenstein says, thrown the ladder away and then there are neither answers, nor questions, just silence (T7).

Wittgenstein’s conclusion (if it can be called this way) about the question of life is then that the solution of the problem is its sheer vanishing (T6.521). The problem disappears when one acknowledges that it is absurd. It is a question that cannot be expressed in our language, so there is neither question nor answer. The only way of facing this problem is not to speak about it, become silent. It is precisely the last aphorism of the *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (T7).

## **2. Two possible interpretations of Wittgensteinian theses and of the notion of “nonsense”**

After explaining Wittgenstein’s position about the meaning of life in the *Tractatus*, I would like to ask how we can understand this position and if it is

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<sup>4</sup> Further clarifications on the differences among “senseless” and “nonsense” can be found in Glock’s *A Wittgenstein’s Dictionary*.

consistent or even, satisfactory. We need to raise this problem in order to face similar situations to those posed by Eagleton (2007:36-37): if someone has an existential crisis and queries about the meaning of his life, a look-up in a dictionary for some meaning will not help him at all. In a similar way, I would like to consider whether it would be helpful to explain Wittgenstein's critique to philosophical questions to someone who has an existential crisis or to apply the method proposed in the *Tractatus* to solve their existential doubts. That is, what if we tell to the sufferer that their doubts are absurd, because they are not expressible? What if we tell them that the only solution to their concerns is not to formulate these questions, to avoid them, to become silent?

In order to answer these questions and solve (if possible) this difficulty, I would like to point out that Wittgenstein's work is aphoristic, fragmentary and difficult to understand. There is not a unified and clear interpretation of his work, but rather different trends, sometimes opposed. Similarly, his critique to the meaning of the life in the *Tractatus* is complex and controversial. It has not been unanimously understood and is open to manifold interpretations, which give different answers to the raised question. Thus, in the following subsections, I analyse two different ways of interpreting Wittgenstein's position on the question of life in the *Tractatus*: namely, the resolute and the illuminating ones. Each of them understands differently what "nonsense" means and gives divergent answers to the aforementioned questions.

## **2.1 The resolute answer to the question of meaning of life**

One of the most recent and controversial ways of understanding the Tractarian critique to the meaning of life is the resolute reading, proposed by James Conant and Cora Diamond, among other authors. They understand Wittgenstein's solution to the meaning of the life (and all the related metaphysical questions) in a radical way and propose to eliminate these questions:

According to Conant, the primary characteristic of the resolute reading of the *Tractatus* is the rejection of the idea that this book has *something* that requires being grasped and applied by the reader, a method or a way of living according to *some* content... (2006:173-174. Italics by Conant). This author also rejects the idea that the sentences of the *Tractatus* content a theory that specifies the conditions under which some sentences or actions make sense or not. Quite

the opposite, the resolute readers reject the idea that Wittgenstein aimed to put forward substantive theories, doctrines or concepts in his work. The kind of philosophy that Wittgenstein sought to practice not consisted in putting forward theories, but in an activity of elucidation and dissolution of philosophical concepts and existential doubts. These doubts are dissolved when the reader of the *Tractatus* understands them as nonsensical and discards them (Conant, ib.).

The *Tractatus* itself, all the content and related metaphysical questions are thus, according to Conant, just plain nonsense. They mean nothing, are purely absurd and have to be dissolved (2006:176). Therefore, it is not possible to add anything else after Wittgenstein's critique of philosophical questions. We cannot say anything about the meaning of life. There is not answer to this question, the only valid approach to it is its dissolution.

In this sense, the *Tractatus* is committed "just to a piecemeal approach to solving philosophical problems", which consists in showing that those metaphysical contents, which seemed to be profound and somehow "life-guiding", were, in fact, mere nonsense (Conant, 2011:626). The only possible way of understanding this book is to become aware that the first "state of understanding" of the book was only apparent (Conant, 2011:628). There is nothing to understand, think or apply after reading this book, just pieces of nonsense that must be dissolved.

A clarification may be required to understand this position properly: for the resolute readers the term "nonsense" just denotes a critique and a way of naming a sort of illusion, namely, the one that is generated through the inability of speakers to understand their own lack of understanding. In the first and wrong reading of the *Tractatus*, the confused reader did not have a clear view about what he was doing with these words. Apparently, he seemed to understand something, but actually he did not understand it, because there was nothing to understand (2011:630). Once he has acknowledged this nonsense and the illusion is manifest, there is nothing more to understand or speak about. The content has shown to be nonsensical, then the problem has been solved and there is just silence.

In a similar vein, Cora Diamond explains the way of getting rid of the illusion of understanding the *Tractatus*, and subsequently, the way of becoming aware about the nonsense that entails all the questions about the meaning of life. In proposing this, she follows the aphorism 6.54 of the *Tractats*, which I quote:

“My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly”  
(T6.54)

According to Diamond, a resolute reading of the *Tractatus* implies “to throw the ladder away”. That is, to throw away any “attempt to take seriously the language of 'features of reality'” or even to understand terms such as “meaning” or “sense” in a substantive and referential way (1988:7). Diamond maintains that reading Wittgenstein’s work resolutely requires a serious commitment to “not-chickening-out” with our language. Moreover, according to Diamond, Wittgenstein never asserted that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words, but shown. There is nothing mystical or profound in the *Tractatus*, there is nothing like some “sort of mysterious kind of meaning” that cannot be said, but just shown. Quite the opposite, in this book there is just confusion and nonsense (1988:7).

Diamond admits that sometimes it may be useful, or even necessary, to speak about the meaning of life, or to look for a mystical approach to our concerns (for example, in faith or looking for a religious relief to a personal crisis...). Notwithstanding, she also maintains that these contents are not present in the *Tractatus* at all. That is, if we accept the resolute understanding of the *Tractatus*, the content (if can be called so) of the book has to be let go of and honestly taken to be what they really is: “a real, plain nonsense”. (Diamond, 1988:8).

In conclusion, according to Conant and Diamond, speaking about metaphysical questions or about the meaning of life after the *Tractatus* turns out to become a real, plain nonsense. We cannot speak about these topics and pretend to make sense. And, which is more important to the topic of this paper, we cannot pretend that there are solutions to our vital and existential queries in Wittgenstein’s work. Maybe someone can find answers to these queries in the faith or in other branches of the philosophy, but never in the *Tractatus*, which is (again and according to the resolute readers) just plain nonsense.

## 2.2 The illuminating answer to the question of the meaning of life

An alternative interpretation of Wittgenstein's critique to meaning in the *Tractatus* can be found in Peter Hacker's *Illusion and Insight* (1986/1997). Some authors, for example Conant who criticises deeply Hacker's thesis, call this interpretation the "standard view" (Conant, 2006:174). I will call it the "illuminating view", due to its content.

According to Hacker, in a first reading, the Tractarian solution to the riddle of life is unconvincing and even annoying. Remaining silent about what cannot be said is not enough to solve philosophical questions, even less when these questions are not only theoretical, but linked to existential doubts and vital concerns. For this very reason, for the dissatisfaction that this first reading of *Tractatus* causes (on a theoretical and also on a vital level), Hacker maintains that this unconvincing solution means something, which he calls an "illuminating nonsense" (1986:18).

In opposition to the "plain nonsense", which resolute readers find in the *Tractatus*, Hacker distinguishes between two different kinds of nonsense: the misleading and the illuminating ones. Moreover, he addresses a severe critique –also inspired in the *Tractatus*– to the philosophy in its traditional sense and to the resolute readers, as well.

Hacker accepts and follows the Tractarian delimitation about what can be said and not. However, he does not stop at the moment of silence, apparently established in the seventh aphorism of the book, but tries another approach in an attempt to grasp the ineffable. According to Hacker, philosophy is not enough to understand ourselves and our lives. The solution of the riddle of life cannot be found just in philosophy: a mere theoretical, philosophical answer to our queries will be empty or nonsensical (1986:21). Following the *Tractatus*, Hacker criticises the conception of philosophy as a discipline that provides knowledge about "the essential, metaphysical, nature of the world" (1986:14). If someone tried to say something meaningful about metaphysical topics from a philosophical perspective, he would be incoherent and his words would become nonsensical. In other words, if we accept the Tractarian critique to metaphysics and its delimitation of sense, we also have to accept that any attempt to describe the essence of things will violate boundaries of sense, misuse language and will be nonsensical. (1986:21).

This is the misleading nonsense that appears, according to Hacker's

interpretation of the *Tractatus*, when philosophers try to express what just can be shown (1986:19). Examples encompass theological proofs to demonstrate the existence of God, philosophical theories about the Good, the Beauty or any attempt at defining meaningful thesis about the meaning of life, as it was explained in the first section of the present paper. However, according to Hacker, the Tractarian critique to philosophical and existential questions does not mean that there is no sense or no possibility of understanding the ineffable. Hacker finds here the second notion of nonsense: the illuminating one.

According to Hacker, when we acknowledge the nonsense that appears in philosophy, also appears some light, under which we understand something. This is what he calls an “illuminating nonsense”. It is illuminating because it guides the attentive reader to apprehend what was shown by nonsensical propositions. We only understand it indirectly and incompletely (1986:18).

Hacker accepts that Wittgenstein never used the expression “illuminating nonsense”. What the Austrian philosopher said, as it has been already explained, was that the propositions of the *Tractatus* elucidate something, when they are understood as nonsensical. They are pseudo-propositions over which one can climb in order to see the World aright. When one has realised that these propositions are nonsensical and has thrown away the ladder, one would be, so to say, “illuminated”. He has thus acquired another perspective about philosophy and the World (1986:26). In this sense, Hacker maintains that the *Tractatus* presents nonsensical pseudo-propositions that bring some light to the reader and make some sense about the ineffable and nonsensical (1986:25).

There is then something beyond philosophy and beyond *Tractatus*, which has a strange and unclear sense. It cannot be said in proper words, just illuminated or reflected by nonsense.

There are some additional texts of the early Wittgenstein that support Hacker’s idea of “illuminating nonsense”. In the preface of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote that this book “will draw a limit to the expression of thoughts”. However, in order to draw such limit, “we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit”, that is, “we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought”. This limit can be drawn only in language and “what lies on the other side of the limit will be nonsense” (T, p.3). Wittgenstein also wrote in a letter to Ficker, the editor of the *Tractatus*, that this book “consists of two parts: the one presented here, plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this

second part that is the important one”<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, according to Wittgenstein, there is something beyond the boundaries established by language and logic. We can think about it, without being able to express it properly. It is certainly nonsensical and inexpressible. Notwithstanding, this is the most important part of the *Tractatus*, the one that cannot be said.

Following these texts, Hacker coins the expression “illuminating nonsense”. He maintains that, although we speak nonsense when we try to grasp meaning of the ineffable (for example, when we try to say something about the meaning of life), and although these nonsenses say nothing about the World, they do reveal or show certain qualities of logic and reality, which cannot be expressed in any other way. He also calls it a “meaningless nonsense”, in reference to propositions that do not say anything but show some unsayable content (1997:16). Using another metaphor, Hacker explains that the “nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* manage to echo or whistle the metaphysical melody of what cannot be uttered for an insightful reader”. These sentences are categorised as “illuminating nonsenses” and, despite being nonsensical *sensu stricto*, are nevertheless able to convey insights into the hidden nature of reality and ourselves (Hacker, 1997:18).

There are, then, some contents (maybe not contents; but echoes, whistles or mirror reflections) that resound in Wittgenstein’s critique to philosophical meaning in the *Tractatus*. We cannot address these weird contents directly, as our words fail in this task and become nonsensical; but we can express or show them in a different, not verbal or logical way, which is close to absurd. Questions about the meaning of life, and the nonsense that they entail, can be placed in this complicated and absurd field.

### **2.3 Comparison and closing remarks**

I have explained two interpretations regarding the notion of “nonsense” in *Tractatus* and their related answers to the query about the meaning of life. According to the resolute readers, this question cannot be formulated properly and correctly from the Tractarian perspective. It is possible to obtain answers to this query from other fields, but certainly not in the *Tractatus*. Any pretension of

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<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein’s “Letter to Ficker”, quoted by von Wright (1971:16).

finding a solution to the riddle of life in this book will only bring nonsense and misinterpretation of Wittgenstein's work. On the contrary, according to Hacker, there are two different kinds of nonsense: the explicit and misleading one, which emerges when we try to speak about what cannot be said; and the indirect, illuminating or meaningless one, which appears beyond the limits of the understandable and expressible. The second one can be just whistled or reflected, not expressed by meaningful words.

A necessary clarification is required to frame this comparison and make my point clear: I do not consider that resolute readers are wrong in their interpretation of Wittgenstein's work. I accept that on the hermeneutic level (where Wittgenstein's work is interpreted to the letter) the resolute theses are correct, solid and well argued. I also accept that the resolute readers are more interested in philosophical and theoretical debates (the meaning of meaning) than in existential or vital crises (the meaning of our lives). However, if we accept that the questions about the meaning of life are not just merely theoretical, but vital and existential concerns, I find Hacker's answer more accurate and satisfactory rather than the resolute one, for the three following reasons:

The first one is a biographical reason: it is possible to ask why Wittgenstein kept writing about philosophy and meaning of life, even though he stated in the *Tractatus* that the solution to the riddle of life was to become silent. That is, he wrote the *Tractatus* in 1917. Then, he abandoned philosophy, became a school teacher and a gardener, and after some existential crises, he came back to philosophy with a pluralistic approach to language, related to human practices (Monk, 1990:191ff.). Afterwards, he kept writing about philosophy until few days before his death. Thus, his own solution to the riddle of life was not the silence, but trying to say something unsayable, in a different way; trying to articulate some (non)sense that cannot be said, but shown somehow.

It is also relevant to remind that in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein did not say that there is no sense, but that it cannot be expressed, just shown (T4.1212). As it has also been quoted above, in his "Lecture on Ethics", he identified the search of an absolute good as an impossible, though respectable, search; which runs against the boundaries of language. In essence, it is nonsensical, but it is also unavoidable for any human being who tries to think about ethics or religion (LE, pp.11-12). Moreover, in his later work, he wrote that "the results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of

language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery” (PI 119)<sup>6</sup>. In 1938, he gave lectures on religion in Cambridge, in which he stated that religious believes do not rest on historic, logic or rational basis in the same sense as ordinary believes. Religious believes are neither reasonable, nor unreasonable. These believes cannot be treated as a matter of reasonability, because they belong to a completely different field, which is beyond history, science or rationality. However, it does not mean that they do not exist or are false, because they articulate and give meaning to the life of believers (LRB, 57-58)<sup>7</sup>. To sum up: in his entire life Wittgenstein tried to grasp something about what cannot be properly said and some of his later work and thoughts are addressed to try to clarify these topics. However, resolute readers barely take into account this part of Wittgenstein’s work and focus primarily in the *Tractatus*.

The second reason is linguistic and philosophical: in their resolute interpretation of the *Tractatus*, Conant and Diamond understand language as completely referential, as if the only valid use of language were the scientific one, according to which words refer to things and nothing else can be said. This understanding is similar to the positivist conception of language proposed by the members of the Circle of Vienna, who were pursuing a distinction between the correct and veritable expression of reality and all the misuses of language that only bring confusion<sup>8</sup>. The logical atomism present in the intermediate sections of the *Tractatus* seemed to fit perfectly in this referential understanding of language. Therefore, the members of the Vienna Circle proposed a positivist interpretation of the *Tractatus*, according to which the verifiable sentences of natural science are the only valid sentences and the only possible truth<sup>9</sup>. However, in order to maintain this interpretation of the *Tractatus*, the members of the Vienna Circle (and the resolute readers as well) have to focus just on the picture theory of language proposed in the first four sections of the book and disregard the final parts, especially the aphorisms after the 5.6, where logic is defined as the boundary of the expressible and there are references to the tasks

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<sup>6</sup> The *Philosophical Investigations* are quoted as PI, followed by aphorism.

<sup>7</sup> The “Lectures on Religious Belief” are quoted as LRB, followed by number of page.

<sup>8</sup> For this interpretation, see the foundational manifesto of The Vienna Circle “The Scientific Conception of the World. The Vienna Circle”, published in Neurath (1973: 299-318) (There are also several editions of the *Manifesto* available online.)

<sup>9</sup> For this interpretation, see Hahn, “Empirismus, Mathematik, und Logik”. He was a member of the Vienna Circle and one of the first readers of the *Tractatus*. See also Carnap “Über Protokollsätze”, where he identifies the elementary observation sentences with the verifiable sentences of the *Tractatus*.

of philosophy, the ineffable and the mystical. All these contents seemed to be purely nonsensical and not so relevant to these interpreters. Moreover, Moritz Schlick (the leader of the Vienna Circle) was constantly inviting Wittgenstein to share the *Tractatus* with them, although Wittgenstein rejected all the invitations. Finally, he accepted to join them in some discussions, however, most times he did not want to speak about logic or philosophy; he would rather read poetry to the astonished logicians (see Monk, 1990:242ff.).

Beyond the anecdotes and the philosophical debates, it is worth taking into account that in our everyday use of language there are more uses than the scientific or referential one. That is, we speak with metaphors, irony, jokes; there is poetry, absurd expressions and meaningful ellipsis. We understand them, they belong to our way of expressing ourselves and they cannot be just eliminated or disregarded, in order to propose a strict positivist and referential use of language. The consideration that the only valid use of language is the scientific, referential one is not enough to give an account of how we, human beings, are and communicate. This referential conception is a strict and merely theoretical understanding of language, which does not take into account that in our lives there are much more uses of language, which are not strictly referential. These uses might not have a real reference in the World, might be confusing and absurd; however, they are part of our lives, we use and (somehow) understand them; and philosophers should take them into account as well. Most members of the Vienna Circle, nevertheless, as well as some resolute readers, do not seem to accept this fact and understand language in its strictly referential use<sup>10</sup>.

The third reason has already been mentioned: it is the emotional or psychological one, related to the painful reality of existential crises. As Eagleton maintains, if someone asks about the meaning of his life, he is not asking about any concept or theory, but about certain vital unease; in this sense, he does not need logical clarification but solace, and probably he is more likely to reach for suicide pills than for a dictionary (2007:38). If we accept this, the resolute solution is not enough to face real and vital crises. That is, if someone has an existential crisis and wants to end up with his life, would it be useful to tell him that his queries are plain nonsense and have to be dissolved in order to see the

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<sup>10</sup> It is not my intention to generalise and apply my critique to all positivist and resolute readers. I understand that there are different authors in both trends, nuances in their theories and their views on language have varied through time. My critique goes against the strictly referential understanding of *Tractatus* which is present in Conant's and Diamond's work, analysed in this paper, and the authors of the Vienna Circle mentioned in footnotes 9 and 10.

World rightly and not formulate these doubts never again?

It is also possible to argue that the resolute solution to existential crises is just located on a theoretical and abstract level, quite far away from our real and actual concerns. The resolute authors do not seem to understand that there is unawareness that cannot be expressed properly with words, but that really does harm. This fact (a pain that cannot be said but hurts) can be explained better by Hacker's "illuminating nonsense" than by Conant's and Diamond's "plain nonsense". For this reason I find Hacker's answer to the meaning of life more accurate than the resolute one.

I would like to make a final consideration, linked to the third reason and to something that can be called the "social consideration of philosophy". When resolute readers understand philosophy as a merely theoretical and conceptual discipline and they develop their arguments on this abstract level; they also isolate philosophy from human lives and prevent this discipline from being linked to everyday concerns. This strict and abstract comprehension of philosophy does not allow to think the real problems, difficulties and concerns that worry us in our daily lives. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the resolute reading is a sterile and alienated understanding of philosophy, quite academic and deep, but quite different as well to the living philosophy that Socrates put into practice in the agora.

There is, then, a barrier among the academic philosophy and the everyday concerns. For this same reason, philosophy is often criticised for being useless or proposing abstract and sterile theories, far away from our daily life. This critique is not just a debate among philosophers and non-philosophers, but has impact on philosophers' work (for example, teaching) and for the future of the discipline. For example, if philosophy is understood as a useless and empty discipline, not related to our lives, it is more likely that legislators decide that it should not be taught in schools, as there is no reason to do it. Quite the opposite, the considerations about the meaning of life presented in this paper can serve as an example of "utility" of philosophy and "connection" of this discipline to some human concerns. So what is offered here is an answer to the question about why it is important to study and teach philosophy. It is my intention, then, to propose a real and living understanding of philosophy, following Socrates, and other philosophers who wanted to discuss philosophical questions on the street with everyone. The philosophical enterprise could be then characterized, Wittgenstein *dixit*, in the following way: "What *we* [philosophers] do is to bring

words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI 116).

After this consideration, in the final part of the article, I will give some examples of answers to the query of life, which are nonsensical, and possibly absurd, but at the same time they are useful to express something that, strictly speaking, cannot be expressed. These fictional examples bring some light to the topic of this paper, serve as illustrations of Hacker’s concept of “illuminating nonsense” and, indirectly, give some (weird) answers to the query about the meaning of our lives.

### **3. Showing what cannot be said: some fictional examples**

To close this article, I would like to propose that some fictional contents can serve as examples that show what cannot be said and this also can illuminate, indirectly, the Tractarian ineffable answer to the query of life. At the same time, they can bring some (strange) light to our queries and doubts about the meaning of life. These examples come from science-fiction stories where the question about the meaning of life is asked and answered in an almost unintelligible way.

The first example is *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by the British writer Douglas Adams<sup>11</sup>; the second one is *The Left Hand of the Darkness*, by the USA writer Ursula K. LeGuin. These two examples are unconventional and surprising answers to the question about the meaning of life that show, with a different tone, something related to what has been argued in this paper.

In Adams’ example, there is a computer, called Deep Thought, which was processed to have all the answers of “Life, the Universe and Everything” (2000:113). When some wise men and women asked Deep Thought about the meaning of life, the computer said that there was an answer, but he needed some time to process it (2000:115). Seven and half million years later, Deep Thought finally had the answer and it was ‘42’ (2000:120). When the wise men and women refused it and said that ‘42’ was a nonsensical answer, the computer responded that if human beings were dissatisfied with that answer it was because, actually, they did not know what the question was (2000:122).

In LeGuin’s case, Genry, the narrator (an explorer with a complicated diplomatic mission in a strange World) goes to Oderhord, a region of foretellers, in search for some answers about his mission. One of the foretellers, Faxe,

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<sup>11</sup> Eagleton also mentions this example in his book about the meaning of life (on the 42th page!) (See Eagleton, 2007:42ff.)

explains him how to formulate prophetic questions: “The more qualified and limited the question, the more exact the answer. Vagueness breeds vagueness” (1969:32). Faxe also tells Genry that some questions are not answerable and cannot be formulated because they wreck the humans. He gives an example: Lord of Shorth forced the Foretellers to answer the question about the meaning of life. In an effort to answer it, the Foretellers stayed in the darkness for six days and nights. At the end, “all the Celibates were catatonic, the Zanies were dead, the Pervert clubbed the Lord of Shorth to death with a stone” (ib.).

It does not mean, Faxe follows his explanation, that questions such as the meaning of life do not have answer, but that knowing the answer brings craziness and wreck to humankind, so it is better not to ask them. The reason of this ban is that the unknown is what life is based on. In Faxe’s words: “The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty” (1969:37). That is the only liveable answer. Any other answer would carry craziness, violence and death (that is, not life) to humankind.

To close my explanation and link previous examples to the theses presented in this paper, I would like to point out that these two weird answers to the question of the meaning of life are quite Wittgensteinian, in a broad sense.

Deep Thought’s solution to the riddle of life is Wittgensteinian because the computer recommends the confused human beings to clarify themselves and their ideas, before asking unsolvable and confuse questions. This is one of the methods that the later Wittgenstein proposed in his *Philosophical Investigations* with a view to avoiding philosophical misunderstandings: the “grammatical investigation” or “analysis”:

“Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away.

Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language.—Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an ‘analysis’ of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart” (PI 90)

Then, according to Wittgenstein and to Deep Thought, in order to have real answers, it is necessary to clarify questions first. Otherwise, everything will be

confuse and unclear.

With regard to LeGuin's case: the answer to the riddle of life is that we cannot know everything because life is based on uncertainty. To be alive is to accept that we cannot know everything. Even though all the questions were solved, we would not know everything. The idea echoes almost perfectly the statement of the aforementioned aphorism 6.52 of *Tractatus*: "[...] if all possible scientific questions [are] answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all" (T6.52).

It does not mean that these problems do not exist or that they are unanswerable, it is just that we cannot express them. That is not possible, because there are ineffable realities in our lives that we cannot grasp with our words and thoughts. On the contrary, asking and trying to know some things, such as the meaning of life, will bring craziness and death to humankind. And "just that is the answer" (T6.52, again).

Therefore, Faxe's recommendations to avoid answering problematic questions that would bring craziness are similar to the following aphorisms of *Tractatus*:

"The temporal immortality of the soul of man, that is to say, its eternal survival also after death, is not only in no way guaranteed, but this assumption in the first place will not do for us what we always tried to make it do. Is a riddle solved by the fact that I survive forever? Is this eternal life not as enigmatic as our present one? The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time.

(It is not problems of natural science which have to be solved.)"  
(T6.4312)

"The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem.

(Is not this the reason why men to whom after long doubting the sense of life became clear, could not then say wherein this sense consisted?)"  
(T.6521)

"There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical"  
(T6.522)

There is then a boundary (present in *Tractatus* and in Faxe's considerations about the queries about life) that separates what can be known and what cannot be known. It is also present in the differences among what can be said and what can be shown, and in the differences among the scientific approach to knowledge and the mystical attitude. The second dimension, which is beyond the limit of the expressible, is present in our lives in a different and strange way. There are risks if we try to understand this dimension. The ineffable and the mystical field is beyond logic and can entail craziness. However, this is a dimension present in our lives.

Therefore, there are answers to the questions of the meaning of life; however they cannot be expressed, just shown indirectly by nonsenses, or by what Hacker calls "illuminating nonsenses", such as those I have presented, following Adams' and LeGuin's examples.

A final consideration is required to close my argumentation: science-fiction is not the only way of trying to show what cannot be said. There are many different ways of trying to grasp that. For example, Hacker refers to singing or whistling (1997:18). The "only" requisites to access to this nonsensical field are to overcome the aforementioned scientific and positivist comprehension of language and to be open to other possible expressions of reality. It is possible to reach some sense and unexpected answers to the queries of our lives with abstract art, creativity, humour, absurd, poetry..., more efficiently than with deep and abstract philosophical thoughts.

And Wittgenstein was also aware about his possibility when in his lecture on aesthetics he stated that:

"The sort of explanation one is looking for when one is puzzled by an aesthetic impression is not a causal explanation, not one corroborated by experience or by statistics as to how people react [...] e.g. you can try out a piece of music in a psychological laboratory and get the result that the music acts in such and such a way under such and such a drug. This is not what one means or what one is driving at by an investigation into aesthetics." (LAE, III, 11, p. 21)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The "Lectures on aesthetics" is quoted as LAE, followed by section, paragraph and number of page.

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# The Philosophical Investigations as a Christian Text

## Christian Faith and Wittgenstein's Rule-following

Jairus Diesta Espiritu\*

### Abstract

Wittgenstein has been considered one of the greatest philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while being one of its most popular mystics. Considering the staunch secularization of philosophy during the Enlightenment, such combination is rarely seen in philosophers of more recent times. The farthest explication of the relationship between Wittgenstein's philosophy and his mysticism has not went as far as making a Christian nature explicit. This can be read as analytic philosophy's identification as an heir to the Enlightenment. There has been much ink spilled in the mystical aspects of his philosophy. Although there are hints of his Christian leanings, patent parallelisms have yet to be drawn properly. Exploring Christian faith and rule-following, this paper asserts that the former is how the latter is characterized in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Faith and rule-following both provide a way of seeing and are sufficient for action.

### 1. Introduction

The question of meaning in life has intentionally been left out in the analytic literature. But recent years have seen the demise of this tendency of analytic philosophy. Part of those to be blamed for this tendency is Ludwig Wittgenstein and the unfortunate positivistic interpretation of his earlier work.<sup>1</sup> As one of the greatest minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his pronouncement of the nonsensicality of the question meant its exclusion in succeeding discourses.

But such tendency has changed in recent years. For the past twenty or thirty years, the analytic literature has seen a surge in the number of philosophers taking up the question.<sup>2</sup> Analytic philosophers have also began taking up metaphysical questions—a field largely discredited by early analytic philosophy.

The discussion of religion per se in the analytic literature has also been rare, if not absent. This is not the tendency at all especially during the Middle Ages. It was when a lot (if not all) philosophers were religious, coming from the

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<sup>1</sup> Metz (2013) pp. 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> Metz (2013) p. 1.

Christian, Jewish, and Moslem sorts.<sup>3</sup> The Enlightenment, however, managed to wipe out such close connection between religion and philosophy. As anti-clerical sentiment grew during that time, so did anti-religious sentiments.<sup>4</sup> I do not mean to say that there are no discussions on the philosophy of religion (for indeed there are plenty). This dropping out consists of a more secular approach to religiosity. But as analytic philosophy has changed in recent years, it is conceivable that religious discourse can again come back into the philosophical scene.

As heirs to the Enlightenment, analytic philosophy missed out a lot of Christian tendencies in Wittgenstein's oeuvre. Indeed, his Christian tendencies have manifested in his personal life. But whether there are Christian themes in his works is seldom talked about.

In this paper, I will draw out one Christian aspect of his later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*. I will be drawing a parallel between faith and the discussion on rule-following in the *Investigations*, asserting that the latter is how Christianity understands the former. It seems that how rules are followed sheds light into how faith is conceived by Christianity.

I do not wish to assert that Wittgenstein in his person is Christian and that his religious leaning is the reason why there is a Christian theme in the *Investigations*. These two assertions could be the topic of an altogether different project. What I intend to assert is the Christianity of the *Investigations* as a text, highlighting the similarity between Christian faith and rule-following.

## **2. Christian Faith**

The relationship between faith and reason has always been the subject of a plethora of debates ever since Christianity and philosophy met. But in this paper, I will be focusing my discussion on faith itself, and not on the usual discussion of its relationship with reason. To avoid controversy on the Christianity of the "faith" to be discussed in this paper, I have chosen to cite the Magisterium<sup>5</sup> of the Catholic Church. This only means that the principal sources of this section's discussion will be from the teachings sanctioned by the Church herself. This

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<sup>3</sup> See Copleston (1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Gay (1969).

<sup>5</sup> This is defined by the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the teaching authority of the Church, (890).

does not mean to discredit philosophical discussions of it like Kierkegaard's. It may be admitted that these non-canonical discussions are helpful.

Observing that the two terms are almost interchangeable in the Bible, Benedict XVI conflates *faith* with *hope*.<sup>6</sup> Drawing from Paul's letter to the Romans, the title of the Pope's encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, suggests such conflation. It comes from a larger biblical phrase, "*Spe salvi facti sumus*," or "In hope we are saved."<sup>7</sup> As it seems impossible to be saved without faith, with this conflation, it now seems impossible to be saved without hope. It follows that Christian faith is hope.

In another letter, Paul talks about how before Christ, there was no hope.<sup>8</sup> Hence, Christians believe that it is only after Christ that they started to hope. It is through an encounter with the divine that an individual gains hope, thereby gaining faith. Benedict XVI talks about faith as letting the faithful "share in Jesus' vision."<sup>9</sup> Faith, therefore, *provides* a way of seeing.

This encounter gives the Christian the evidence that she needs for things that she believes in. The Letter to the Hebrews gives this very notion: "Faith is the *hypostasis* of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen."<sup>10</sup> *Hypostasis* here, is believed to be the central word of the verse by many exegetes today. It is translated in Latin as *substantia*.<sup>11</sup> This points to how faith makes present things that have yet to be present. It is the substance of these soon-to-be-present things. Hence, with faith, things hoped for are just as real as things that are in front of one's eyes.

Taken this way, faith seems to be an epistemological device. But Benedict XVI points out that faith is not purely informative but performative. It is not a function of the mind to gain faith in Christ but the function of the whole individual:

That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> The New American Bible Rom 8:24; hereafter cited as NAB.

<sup>8</sup> NAB Eph 2:12.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI (2007) "On the Meaning of Faith," p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> NAB Heb 11:1, Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, pp. 16-17.

the gift of a new life.<sup>12</sup>

Here, faith does not give the Christian a theoretical knowledge but a practical one. This distinction goes back to Aristotle, in his distinction between the moral and intellectual virtues.<sup>13</sup> In a way, faith comes close to giving us *phronesis*, or practical wisdom.

Gustavo Gutierrez points out that action, for Christians, is not a product of theological reflection of their faith. Action comes directly from faith and it is only afterwards that theology can come into play.<sup>14</sup> For instance, no one had to tell the martyrs to die before they deny their faith in Christ. A thorough theological background is not necessary to become a martyr. The mere presence of faith is enough to lead one to act in a certain way. Faith, therefore, is a sufficient condition for action.

In this brief section, I have characterized faith in two ways:

- (1) Faith provides a way of seeing
- (2) Faith is a sufficient condition for action.

I propose that both of these characteristics are present in the discussion of rule-following in the Investigations. Moreover, (2) is a consequence of (1). Because of being able to see in a certain way, one is led to act in a certain way as well.

### **3. Rule-following**

#### 3.1. Providing a way of seeing

The Tractarian pronouncement that the “limits of my language are the limits of my world”<sup>15</sup> still rings true, in a certain sense, in the Investigations. His discussion of color-terms, for instance, reduces the redness of red to a function of language. When asked how he knew that something is red, he simply replied that he learned English.<sup>16</sup> This should not be read as an endorsement of a

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<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI (2007) *Spe Salvi*, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> See Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (1962).

<sup>14</sup> Gutierrez (1996) p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.6

<sup>16</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* 381; hereafter cited as PI.

relativism of sorts. This only means that when we see something as X, it is a rule that gives us the term to refer to X as X.

In this sense, rules provide a way of seeing as much as faith does. One only sees a red rose as red because English calls it such. This is also why a dog can be said to be afraid of being beaten by his master while we cannot say that the dog is afraid of being beaten by his master *tomorrow*.<sup>17</sup> The rules that dogs follow in their dog-game do not allow for a concept of tomorrow. Because of these rules, therefore, a dog sees his master's beating in a certain way. This way excludes the possibility of expecting it to happen tomorrow.

In the same vein, Christ's dying on the cross can either be seen as salvific or mundane. It is because of faith that it can be seen as the former, otherwise it would just be the mundane death of an ambitious son of a carpenter.

### 3.1.1. Rules and aspect perception

The previous section certainly recalls Wittgenstein's notion of aspect perception. A brief caesura on aspect perception is therefore in order.

The discussion of aspect perception was included in what was traditionally known as Part II of the Investigations. The most recent edition, however, no longer distinguishes between the two parts of the Investigations. The editors thought that the addition of Part II was an unqualified, arbitrary decision by Anscombe and Rhees.<sup>18</sup> The Investigations that is being talked about in this paper, therefore, only refers to what was traditionally known as Part I.

But for the sake of clarity of concepts, I think that there is still a need to discuss aspect perception in relation to the overall project of this paper. This section will clarify the relationship among the concepts of aspect perception, rules, and faith.

Fronza succinctly describes how aspect perception works:

However it may be, it takes an attitude to see-as. Transposing this theme to a much grander scale one would have thus: what one recognizes in a phenomenon or cluster of phenomena is a function of one's attitude. And a difference in attitude between two subjects observing the same

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<sup>17</sup> PI 493, 650.

<sup>18</sup> Hacker and Schulte (2009) pp. xxi-xxiii.

phenomenon makes two distinct recognitions of it.<sup>19</sup>

It is because of a certain attitude that one is led to see certain aspects.<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit example, for instance, illustrates how a certain attitude could predispose one to see it solely as a duck, or solely as a rabbit.<sup>21</sup> Here, the same duck-rabbit datum is being perceived but the recognitions differ. No recognition can be argued for as the correct one.

It is therefore clear that to see a certain aspect is not a well-thought out decision.<sup>22</sup> The seeing of an aspect just suddenly *dawns* on one. This dawning then enables one to see the aspect continuously thereafter.<sup>23</sup>

Aspect perception is clearly provided for by rules. These rules dictate how one will see a certain datum. The difference in rules adopted only means difference in attitude. And difference in attitude means difference in recognition.

The rules governing an attitude, *dawns* on one in a phenomenon called an *aspect dawning*. The *gaining* of faith, therefore, is an aspect dawning. What dawns on one is a form of seeing-as governed by certain rules. And because faith has been gained, one can now see things in the light of faith.

This relationship among aspect perception, rules, and faith is best illustrated by the story of the conversion of Paul. On his way to Damascus to prosecute Christians, "a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him."<sup>24</sup> This light blinded him and it is only after being baptized by Ananias that his sight was restored.<sup>25</sup>

Paul's experience in Damascus saw a dramatic aspect-dawning. It is because of that experience that he began to gain faith. This newly dawned faith has provided him with rules governing his new *way of seeing* things, exemplified by the restoration of his sight. It is now in accordance with these rules that he "began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues."<sup>26</sup> It led him to action.

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<sup>19</sup> Fronda (2010) p. 102.

<sup>20</sup> Philosophy of Psychology I—A Fragment 193; hereafter cited as PPF.

<sup>21</sup> PPF 118.

<sup>22</sup> PI 601-603; PPF 191-192.

<sup>23</sup> Fronda (2010) pp. 105-107.

<sup>24</sup> NAB Acts 9:3.

<sup>25</sup> NAB Acts 9:18.

<sup>26</sup> NAB Acts 9:20.

### 3.2. Sufficient for action

Faith conceived as sufficient for action is laconically clarified by Wittgenstein's discussion on rules. In this way, Christian faith is very much similar to how Wittgenstein conceived of rule-following.

Following a rule for Wittgenstein is not an intellectual activity. He claims that learning a language is mastering a technique.<sup>27</sup> Following linguistic rules is therefore a skill. The best way to illustrate this is through a comparison with swimming. One does not learn how to swim by pure intellection of all the guidelines on how to swim. One learns how to swim through engaging with the activity of swimming itself.<sup>28</sup> The same is true in rule-following. If one only thinks that she follows a rule, she does not really.<sup>29</sup>

Rule-following, therefore, is inherently *performative*, as much as faith is. It is not constituted in thinking about all the applications of a rule in advance as if it were an algorithm.<sup>30</sup> Wittgenstein compares this misconception of rule-following to a machine. As a machine has algorithms which it follows, so do human beings. A rule can be likened to a machine's algorithms. But, says Wittgenstein, this analogy does not take into account the possibility of the machine breaking down. The algorithm would not be able to salvage the machine in its application of the rule.<sup>31</sup> Rule-following, therefore, is not constituted by an algorithm.

This is precisely why rule-following is not a mental activity but an act. As one constantly applies a rule the same way, there seems to be a decision in every application of the rule.<sup>32</sup> This conception of rule-following goes into the grain of Wittgenstein's battle cry in the Investigations: "Don't think but look!"<sup>33</sup>

Wittgenstein, however, says elsewhere, "Theology as grammar."<sup>34</sup> This pronouncement is very obscure as it does not explicitly use the copula. This immediately follows a brief assertion that "grammar tells what kind of object anything is," in the same section. Other scholars take this to consider theology

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<sup>27</sup> PI 199.

<sup>28</sup> Baker & Hacker (2009) p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> PI 202.

<sup>30</sup> PI 197.

<sup>31</sup> PI 193.

<sup>32</sup> PI 186.

<sup>33</sup> PI 66.

<sup>34</sup> PI 373.

and all god-talk as purely grammatical.<sup>35</sup> This is a strong assertion. But what I would like to point out is only the connection of this section with how Gutierrez places theology with faith.

It is grammar that specifies the essence of the object<sup>36</sup> and theology is grammar. Object, therefore, comes first before grammar can specify its essence. This is very much like how faith-led action comes first before theology can characterize it. Theology here, plays the same role as grammar, as pointed out by Gutierrez.<sup>37</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper was able to assert that Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following in the Investigations is how Christianity understands faith: (1) it provides a way of seeing, and (2) it is a sufficient condition for action. Because of drawing up this connection, a correlation between Wittgenstein's religious convictions and his philosophy is, at most, hinted at.

Wittgenstein was quoted saying that he was "strongly affected by [Nietzsche's] hostility against Christianity."<sup>38</sup> Alain Badiou, however, does not read this as a confession of the Christian faith. Such remark, as Badiou reads it, is a confession of an eternal, unspeakable sense of the world which is not necessarily Christian.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, Wittgenstein is quoted saying that he cannot help but see things in a religious point of view.<sup>40</sup>

Badiou may or may not be correct. But whether this religiosity is indeed Christian is an altogether different question. Whatever the correct interpretation of these remarks may be, they are enough to prove his religiosity.

Wittgenstein is known to be very keen on the tiniest details of his drafts of the Investigations. Therefore, the patent parallelisms drawn in this paper should not be seen as coincidental. This opens up an avenue for tracing more Christian themes in the Philosophical Investigations, the question of Wittgenstein's own religious convictions, and the relationship between the two.

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<sup>35</sup> See Fronda (2010).

<sup>36</sup> PI 371.

<sup>37</sup> Gutierrez (1996).

<sup>38</sup> McGuinness (1988), p. 225 as quoted by Badiou (2011), p. 74.

<sup>39</sup> Badiou (2011), p. 83-85.

<sup>40</sup> Drury (1996), p. 76 as quoted by Fronda (2010), p. 5.

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## The Moral Status of Infants and Fetuses Teleological Potential, Justice and Charity

Sara Chan Yun Yu\*

### Abstract

In this paper, I review accounts of the moral status of infants and fetuses to show that they either fail to establish that infants are properly rights-bearers or fail to explain the grounds of this status. I then develop an account of teleological potential understood with reference to Philippa Foot's Natural Norms and argue that it can ground the rights-bearing status of infants and fetuses while avoiding the typical objections to potentiality-based accounts. I then incorporate this into a two-fold account of moral status directed at concerns of justice and charity, and grounded in sophisticated cognitive capacities and sentience respectively, which allows one to maintain that fetuses possess rights-bearing status alongside the intuition that infants are due more moral consideration. Finally, I consider potential objections based on concerns about women's autonomy and implications about the severely cognitively disabled.

Although abortion remains highly contested in political spheres, recent philosophical literature tends to support a permissive view, reflecting the dominance of accounts that ground rights-bearing in sophisticated cognitive capacities.<sup>1</sup> Lacking such capacities, the typical argument goes, the fetus lacks the normative personhood and attendant rights that form the basis of a strong embargo against killing it. The requirement of sophisticated cognitive capacities, however, also excludes infants from normative personhood.<sup>2</sup> Those who maintain that infants are properly rights-bearers, therefore, have reason to think such accounts incomplete. To my mind, the most straightforward response to infants' lack of sophisticated cognitive capacities is to appeal to their potential to develop such capacities, which suggests that fetuses are similarly entitled to moral consideration. However, even if one is sympathetic, as I am, to fetal rights, it undeniably seems worse to harm an infant than to harm a very early fetus or a

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<sup>1</sup> Jaworska & Tannenbaum (2018).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. See Giubilini & Minerva (2012).

zygote. This essay aims to ground the rights-bearing status of both infants and fetuses while respecting this intuition. Towards this end, Section I motivates this project by reviewing existing accounts and showing how they fail either to establish infants' intrinsic rights-bearing status or to satisfactorily ground their possession of such status. Section II then develops an account of teleological potential as the grounds for rights-bearing status and Section III integrates this account into a two-fold account of moral status based on justice and charity and shows how this can explain why infants morally matter more than fetuses. Finally, Section IV considers some possible objections.

## **I: Existing Accounts**

This section examines the pro-abortion and anti-abortion literature in search of an account that both ascribes rights-bearing status to infants and successfully explains the grounds for it. I will begin by clarifying some key terms. First, moral status refers how much an entity or its interests morally matter for the entity's own sake, and may be distinguished from moral standing, understood as whether an entity matters morally.<sup>3</sup> Next, full moral status indicates that one is due the highest moral consideration and is sometimes described in terms of personhood, where to be a person in a normative sense is to possess full moral status. One feature of full moral status is that it entails pre-emptive moral consideration, or the possession of moral rights. I will refer to this specifically as rights-bearing status.

Perhaps the most influential view is that rights-bearing status is grounded in the possession of certain sophisticated cognitive capacities, such as autonomy,<sup>4</sup> self-awareness,<sup>5</sup> or the ability to conceive of oneself as a continuous subject of mental states.<sup>6</sup> Precisely which capacity is unimportant for the purposes of this paper. What is important is that both infants and fetuses lack these sophisticated cognitive capacities. Some theorists, notably Tooley and Singer, bite the bullet and accept that infants therefore are not normative persons.<sup>7</sup> Although other prudential reasons to treat infants as if they are rights-bearers may mitigate the

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<sup>3</sup> Steinbock (2011), Buchanan (2009), although some use the two interchangeably (e.g. Jaworska & Tannenbaum, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Quinn (1984), pp.49-52.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. McMahan (2002), p.45.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Tooley (1972), p.44.

<sup>7</sup> Tooley (1972), p.49, Singer (1993), pp.169-171.

practical consequences of this, the notion that infants are not intrinsically rights-bearers is still repugnant to commonsense morality.

One account that seeks to explain the moral consideration intrinsically due to infants is Jeff McMahan's Time-Relative Interests Account (TRIA). Ultimately, McMahan endorses some form of the sophisticated cognitive capacities account.<sup>8</sup> In addition, however, he introduces the TRIA to explain the moral concern due to entities who lack such capacities. According to the TRIA, how much an entity or its interests matters morally depends not only on the strength of those interests, but also on the strength of the psychological connections, such as memory and hope for the future, between the individual presently and the individual when those interests will be realized.<sup>9</sup> This allows McMahan to explain why it is worse to kill infants than to kill animals: in virtue of their potential for sophisticated capacities, infants have extremely valuable futures, even discounted by their weak psychological connections to those futures.<sup>10</sup> Next, the TRIA can also explain why infants are due more moral concern than fetuses: once infants are born they are exposed to much stimuli, leading their cognitive capacities develop very quickly thus enabling them to have greater psychological connections to their later interests, and entitling them to more moral concern.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, however, although infants' valuable futures and rapidly increasing psychological connections to these futures entitle them to some intrinsic moral status, it still does not ground rights-bearing.

Next, moving away from the sophisticated cognitive capacities account, another influential account is Joel Feinberg's interest view which grounds rights-bearing status in the capacity for interests.<sup>12</sup> Despite focusing on interests, however, Feinberg still requires certain sophisticated cognitive capacities for rights-bearing status, because he holds that the capacity for conscious self-awareness is prerequisite for desires, which in turn is necessary for having interests.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, therefore, Feinberg's view implies that infants lack intrinsic rights-bearing status, although he does mitigate this by arguing

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<sup>8</sup> McMahan (2002), p.242.

<sup>9</sup> McMahan, *forthcoming*, p.2, MacMahan (2002), pp.79-81.

<sup>10</sup> McMahan (2002), p.199, p.205. Elizabeth Harman (2003) also appeals to potential to make a similar point (p185).

<sup>11</sup> Moreover, early fetuses lacking even the developed biological substrates to support consciousness, are on McMahan's view of human beings as embodied minds merely unoccupied human organisms below the threshold of respect.

<sup>12</sup> Feinberg (1993), p.209.

<sup>13</sup> Feinberg (1993), pp.201-203, 209.

infanticide is wrong because of other reasons such as the common good.<sup>14</sup>

Notably, not all who count themselves interest theorists align themselves with Feinberg on what is required to have interests. Bonnie Steinbock, for example, maintains that interests require simply the capacity for consciousness or sentience, which allows her to claim infants have interests.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, however, Steinbock takes interests to ground moral standing rather than rights-bearing.<sup>16</sup> In other words, although infants possess the capacity for interests on Steinbock's account, this is insufficient to ground rights-bearing status.

Thus far, I have discussed several accounts of rights-bearing which support a permissive view of abortion and found that none ascribe intrinsic rights-bearing status to infants. This is, perhaps, unsurprising since infants do not differ significantly from late fetuses in terms of intrinsic cognitive qualities. I will next examine whether the anti-abortion literature may provide a plausible account of the rights-bearing of infants and fetuses.

One traditional way to ground the rights-bearing status of infants and fetuses is in their membership of the human species. Early versions of this view, for example, as posited by Stanley Benn, posit being human as both necessary and sufficient for rights-bearing.<sup>17</sup> Since this precludes other rational species, however, more recent accounts, such as John Finnis's, often accept sophisticated cognitive capacities as the primary grounds for rights-bearing status and posit species membership as a secondary sufficient but not necessary condition.<sup>18</sup> That is, one possesses rights-bearing status either if one possesses sophisticated cognitive capacities or if one is a member of a species which characteristically possesses such capacities. Such accounts, however, are vulnerable to the charge that they ground the substantial moral fact of rights-bearing in a seemingly morally irrelevant biological fact: It is unclear why species membership should be morally relevant for members who lack the morally relevant attributes,<sup>19</sup> and to hold that it does, Peter Singer claims, is "speciesism" and morally equivalent to racism or sexism.<sup>20</sup> The Species Membership account is unsatisfactory

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<sup>14</sup> Feinberg (1993), p.210.

<sup>15</sup> Steinbock (2011), pp.6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Steinbock (2011), p.77.

<sup>17</sup> Benn (1967), pp.69-71.

<sup>18</sup> Finnis (1995), p.48.

<sup>19</sup> McMahan (2002), pp.212-214.

<sup>20</sup> Singer (2015), p.9.

because although it ascribes rights-bearing status to infants, it fails to explain why species membership should ground such status.

Next, other influential accounts within the anti-abortion literature include the Sanctity of Life Account, the Special Relations Account and the Future Like Ours Account. Upon closer examination, however, these accounts turn out to be tangential to rights-bearing: according to Ronald Dworkin's Sanctity of Life account, opposition to abortion derives from belief in the intrinsic, sacred and non-incremental value of human life.<sup>21</sup> Since this value is non-incremental, it is not better for there to be more human lives, but since it is intrinsically valuable, there is objective reason to protect human life where it does exist. Notice, however, that the moral reasons thus generated are impersonal duties: abortion is immoral because it disrespects life, rather than because the fetus itself is worthy of special moral consideration.<sup>22</sup> The sanctity of life account is silent on the issue of rights-bearing status.

Next, the Special Relations Account is built on the fact that certain relationships, such as the parent-child relationship, generate particular duties, such as parents' duty to care for their children. Robert Nozick suggests that the relationship of shared species membership may generate duties to treat members of same species with respect in a similar manner.<sup>23</sup> Crucially, however, the parent-child relationship grounds the special duties of parents towards their children but does not change the child's intrinsic moral status: unrelated individuals have no special duties to the child. Although the Special Relationship account may generate duties for people to treat infants with particular moral consideration, it does not ground intrinsic rights-bearing status.

Finally, Don Marquis's Future Like Ours Account (FLOA) holds that abortion is immoral for the same reason that killing an adult person is immoral, namely because it deprives the victim of a valuable future.<sup>24</sup> The problem, however, is that it does not seem that what is primarily wrong about killing an adult person is that it deprives him of a valuable future. It is equally wrong to kill a 90-year-old as it is to kill an 18-year-old, despite the 18-year-old losing more years of good life. Death may be worse for the 18-year-old than for the 90-year-old, but it is equally wrong to kill them both because doing so violates

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<sup>21</sup> Dworkin (1993), pp.73-74.

<sup>22</sup> McMahan (2002), p.331.

<sup>23</sup> Nozick (1997), p.308.

<sup>24</sup> Marquis (1989), pp.189-192.

their right to life. Thus, although the FLOA may explain why death is bad for fetuses and infants, and so in a sense why it would be wrong to kill them, it does not address rights-bearing.

I have now reviewed accounts of rights-bearing status on both sides of the abortion debate and found that they either fail to establish that infants are properly rights-bearers or fail to explain the grounds of this status, thus establishing the need for such an account.

## II: Natural Norms and Teleological Potential

To my mind, the argument from potential, which posits that the potential to develop sophisticated cognitive capacities grounds rights-bearing status, is the most promising starting point, firstly because it is an intuitive response to infants' lack of sophisticated cognitive capacities and secondly because it grounds rights-bearing status in an intrinsic property. This section will attempt to develop a plausible version of the argument from potential.

Despite its promise, the argument from potential is infamous for two problems: first, the potential for X does not normally confer the rights of X.<sup>25</sup> For example, before 2016, Donald Trump's potential to become president did not give him presidential rights until he actually realized that potential. Second, the argument from potential is vulnerable to the following *reductio ad absurdum*: an egg and sperm technically have the potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities, but most would deny that they are rights-bearers.<sup>26</sup>

These objections are valid but need not be definitive. It is not categorically true that potential can never ground rights: the right to health insurance, for example, is grounded in the potential to fall ill rather than the actuality of being ill.<sup>27</sup> Potentiality accounts may still succeed by explaining why potential should matter in this case.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the second problem can be answered if the *reductio* can be resisted. Whether and how an account from potential may meet these objections depends on how the notion of potential is cashed out.

What does it mean to have potential? One option is that X has the potential to become Y if X will eventually become Y. This, however, is easily subject to

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<sup>25</sup> Singer (1993), p.153, Boonin (2003), p.46, McMahan (2002), p.308.

<sup>26</sup> Griffin (2008), p.84, Sumner (1981), p.104.

<sup>27</sup> Manninen (2007).

<sup>28</sup> Steinbock (2011), p.59.

counter-example: suppose an infant had a genetic cardiac disease that would kill him before he was 3 years-old, it seems strange to suppose that he would therefore not be a rights-bearer whereas other infants without that disease would be. Alternatively, one might determine potential with respect to possibility rather than actuality. That is, X has the potential to become Y if X might possibly become Y. This however is similarly vulnerable to counter-example. Extensive gene therapy could render it possible for dogs to develop sophisticated cognitive capacities, which would imply that normal dogs possess rights-bearing status, which is counterintuitive.<sup>29</sup>

These examples show that determining potential with respect to actuality or possibility results in a quagmire of unpalatable scenarios. The crucial thing, as James Griffin remarks, seems to be that “the moral significance of potentiality [...] depend[s] upon not only what it is potential for, but also *what it is the potential of* (italics mine)”.<sup>30</sup> A viable account of rights-supporting potential must discriminate between different kinds of entities. I submit that a normative or teleological account of potential can do so.

Something is normative if it derives from a standard or a norm, and something is teleological if it involves explanation in terms of purpose. Massimo Reichlin has suggested that an Aristotelian (i.e. teleological) notion of potentiality that conceives of a fetus as “already possessing the human nature (understood as a principle of becoming, rather than a static thing) and actively developing its potential for personhood”,<sup>31</sup> can ground fetal rights. Contemporary readers, however, may be somewhat wary of Aristotelian teleology.<sup>32</sup> Where does the telos come from, they wonder? Who sets the norms? This essay aims to answer these questions with appeal to Phillipa Foot’s notion of natural norms.

According to Foot, living things have the capacity for “natural goodness”, that is, they have goods (and bads) independent of the plans or desires of other things.<sup>33</sup> For example, it is good for a plant to grow well, and it is bad for it to be diseased. This kind of goodness stands in contrast with good predicated of things because it benefits something else, for example, when it is good that an ox plough a field because the farmer desires that the ox plough the field. Natural

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<sup>29</sup> Example from McMahan (2002), pp.310-312.

<sup>30</sup> Griffin (2008), p.84.

<sup>31</sup> Reichlin (1997), p.1.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. see Bernard Williams’s (1985) critique of Aristotelian metaphysical teleology pp.43-44.

<sup>33</sup> Foot (2001), p.26.

goodness is determined with respect to what is characteristically good for a species insofar as it furthers individual survival and propagation of the species.<sup>34</sup> A good x is an x that is ordinarily well-suited as an x to do or live well, to thrive or flourish in a characteristically x way.<sup>35</sup>

An obvious obstacle to extending this view to people is that most now reject the notion of a nature-determined good for individual persons.<sup>36</sup> A man can swear celibacy and there is value in that choice because he freely chooses it even if it is against the end of species propagation. This intrinsic value of autonomy arises because people are possessed of rational capacity, and it is to this that Foot appeals in extending natural goodness to people.<sup>37</sup> We can understand the characteristic way of being and flourishing for persons as the rational way.<sup>38</sup> A thriving human being is one that autonomously chooses his own destiny, and the value of his doing so is properly counted natural goodness. This dovetails nicely with the idea that it is sophisticated cognitive capacities that makes persons special.

Foot's next key premise is that the meaning of good in "a good plant is not diseased" is not significantly different compared to in "a morally good man keeps his promises".<sup>39</sup> Moral goodness does not occupy a sphere distinct from natural goodness. This may surprise contemporary readers whose intuitions have been honed by John Stuart Mill to regard the moral sphere as special and generally other-regarding. Foot, however, argues that moral goodness fits within the wider class of evaluations of natural goodness and shares the same structure of normative evaluation: just as natural goodness is determined with respect to the characteristic good of a species, moral virtues are evaluated in relation to how they contribute to characteristic human flourishing, which is in turn determined with respect to natural norms.<sup>40</sup> For example, just as it is good to stay in bed when one is sick, because that furthers the pursuit of health which is part of human flourishing, it is on Foot's schema, morally good to keep a promise because that furthers an aspect of human flourishing. Notice that this works only because virtue is part of human flourishing, and virtue is only part of

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<sup>34</sup> Foot (2001), p.31, see also Hursthouse (1999), p.199.

<sup>35</sup> Foot, (2001), pp.34-35, Hursthouse (1999), p.205.

<sup>36</sup> Foot (2001), p.37, see also Hursthouse (1999), p.220.

<sup>37</sup> Foot (2001), p.56.

<sup>38</sup> Hursthouse (1999), p.222.

<sup>39</sup> Foot (2001), p.39, Hursthouse (1999), pp.205-206.

<sup>40</sup> Foot (2001), p.66

human flourishing because human beings are firstly social beings whose good is furthered in living in community with each other, and secondly rational beings who can understand morality. Moral goodness is a special subset of natural goodness which generates particularly important considerations and is applicable to beings whose rationality enables them to understand morality.

If we accept moral goodness as a subset of natural goodness, natural goodness can function to explain the notion, key to moral status, of “mattering for one’s own sake”. The capacity for natural goodness is necessary and sufficient for mattering for one’s own sake, which I shall call the possession of normative status. Since moral value is a subset of natural value, however, normative status is necessary but not sufficient for moral status. A plant has natural goodness but does not matter morally. Something further, such as the sentience, is required.

Next, natural norms provide a reference for understanding teleological potential. Recall that the characteristic way of man’s flourishing is via his rationality. This is his telos, it is the natural way in which his life is good. As members of the human species, infants and zygotes potentially have this characteristic way of flourishing, and it is good for their sake that they achieve it. They have the teleological potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities. In contrast, it is not in the nature of a dog in virtue of its dog-hood that it is characteristically rational, regardless of what possibilities gene therapy opens up.

Notice that in basing teleology on species norms, we are implicitly committed to a metaphysical view of persons in which physicality is essential. For example, that we are essentially physical beings with emergent mental properties. A metaphysical view in which we are, for example, embodied minds, would be in tension with the important role species plays in this account.

Next, since natural norms are determined with respect to species, one might worry that this is a disguised kind of speciesism. Although the account from teleological potential does have the same implications as the Species Norm account however, it differs crucially in that it explains why species is a morally relevant fact. By situating moral goodness within the wider concept of natural goodness which is determined with respect to species norms, the relevance of species to morality is made clear: natural goodness, which includes moral goodness, depends on what kind of thing something is, and what kind of thing something is depends on species. On this account, species is not morally

irrelevant.

Having explained how teleological potential can be understood with reference to natural norms, I will now show how teleological potential thus understood can address the problems for potentiality accounts set out at the beginning of this section.

The first problem was how to explain why potential should matter. Bertha Alvarez Manninen suggests that for potential to ground a right, potential must generate an interest in a moral right such that possessing the moral right constitutes a benefit for the potential entity and a denial of the moral right constitutes a harm.<sup>41</sup> What makes this criterion plausible is that it restricts the scope to moral rights. Rights, such as access to healthcare, are fundamentally crucial to one's well-being in a way benefits such as presidential powers are not, which allows explanation of why one can be grounded by potential and the other not. The account from teleological potential can meet Manninen's criterion. It is inbuilt into the concept of teleological potential that it is good for the entity to realise its potential because that potential is its essential nature and not to realise it is accordingly a positive harm, rather than merely a lack of a good. Finally, although rights-bearing status is not itself a right, it is at least as important to well-being as a right since the possession of any right is contingent on the possession of rights-bearing status. Therefore, on the plausible assumption that it is because rights are fundamentally crucial to welfare that they can be grounded in potential, it seems that rights-bearing status, being similarly fundamental to well-being, may also be grounded in potential.

Next, the second problem was how to resist the *reductio ad absurdum* that the potential of the sperm and the egg to develop into normative persons implies that they have rights-bearing status. From a teleological perspective, the sperm has the purpose of fertilizing the egg, and there is goodness when it does so. Crucially however, from a teleological perspective, the sperm is but a part of the man, and although it may be "good" for the sperm to fertilize the egg, the goodness is proper to the man, rather than to the sperm. Something cannot be good "for the sperm's own sake", because the sperm does not have a sake of its own. The sperm does not possess the normative status that is a precondition for moral status. A similar argument may be made with respect to the egg. As for the gametes considered jointly, although they together possess all the genetic

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<sup>41</sup> Manninen (2007).

material for a full human organism, before combination they are still not one organism, and so should not be considered as one entity for which the question of moral status arises. In contrast, the zygote is not a part of either father or mother, but a new entity individualized by its own genetic code. Its goodness therefore cannot be determined with respect to either father or mother, but only properly with respect to itself. The zygote therefore possesses normative status, and being a complete human organism, the teleological potential for normative personhood that grounds rights-bearing status.<sup>42</sup> Since this account does not depend on the zygote being numerically identical to the person it will later become, it is unaffected by the possibility of splitting. Splitting refers to when the zygote, or the few totipotent cells that it divides into, gives rise to not one but two individuals, that is, twins. The possibility of splitting is a problem for accounts that base the harm of killing the fetus on the fetus's numerical identity with a later person, because if splitting occurs, the zygote is not identical to a later person, and cannot be identical to two people.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the account from teleological potential can accommodate the possibility of splitting, because the zygote possesses the teleological potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities regardless of whether this potential is eventually actualized in one or more individuals.

Some may protest that to extend rights-bearing status to the zygote is itself absurd. I suspect, however, that those who would make such an objection would also object to extending rights-bearing status to fetuses, and so would not be attracted to this account anyway. Meanwhile, the majority of those committed to fetal rights already extend rights-bearing status to the zygote.

In sum, this section developed an account of teleological potential based on natural norms. In doing so, I hope to have presented a plausible account of the grounds of the rights-bearing status of infants as well as fetuses.

### **III: Justice and Charity**

Even ardent supporters of fetal rights, however, would be hard pressed to deny that infants are due more moral consideration than early fetuses or zygotes: if one has the opportunity to save only one of either an infant or a zygote in a petri-dish from a burning building, most would agree that one should save the

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<sup>42</sup> See Werner (1974), pp.202-210, for an argument that the zygote is indeed a human being.

<sup>43</sup> E.g. see DeGrazia (2007), p.70.

infant. This section will incorporate the account from teleological potential within a two-fold approach to moral status based on justice and charity to accommodate this intuition.

The distinction between justice and charity is hardly novel. Justice and charity may pull in different directions. For example, to remunerate each worker according to how much he has worked is just, but to give more to he who needs more may be considered charitable. And since moral concerns may be directed at either justice or charity, it seems natural that moral status, may be directed at either justice or charity as well. Indeed, although the justice-based notion of rights-endowing moral status predominates in discussions of the moral status of persons, discussions of the moral status of animals often references charity.<sup>44</sup>

I suggest that persons possess two kinds of moral status, directed at justice and charity respectively. Justice-oriented moral status is equivalent to rights-bearing status, and is grounded in sophisticated cognitive capacities, or the teleological potential for such capacities. Meanwhile, charity-oriented moral status is the moral consideration an entity is entitled to as a proper object of charitable feeling. Suppose someone was uncomfortably warm. Although he has no right, that is, no claim of justice that his discomfort be alleviated, it would be morally good to do so. The moral concern relevant here is not justice, but charity, and it is relevant because of the subject is sentient. There is no charity in fanning a hot rock. Charity-oriented moral status, therefore, is grounded in sentience because it is the feeling pain or pleasure which is the basis of an action's being cruel or kind. And just as animals with greater sentience increase in moral status, a human organism, as it increases in sentience may increase in charity-oriented moral status.

Notice how this differs from rights-bearing status. Whereas rights-bearing status is a threshold concept so someone with better cognitive faculties is not due more rights-bearing status, charity-oriented moral status admits of degrees. Accordingly, although I have argued that teleological potential may ground justice-oriented moral status, I doubt much can be made of a similar argument for charity-oriented moral status. We can understand full moral status, then, as possessing both rights-bearing status and the highest degree of charity-oriented moral status.

To return to the titular concern of this paper, infants, fetuses and even

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<sup>44</sup> Morris (2011), p.268.

zygotes possess rights-bearing status in virtue of their teleological potential. Only infants and post-sentient fetuses, however, possess charity-oriented moral status, and fetuses increase in charity-oriented moral status as their sense capacities develop, thus explaining why infants matter more than zygotes, and why fetuses are thought to matter more the more developed they are. Thus, I hope to have shown that the intuition that infants are due more moral consideration than zygotes can be accommodated alongside acceptance of the rights-bearing status of the unborn implied by the account from teleological potential.

#### **IV: Objections**

Thus far, I have argued that there is currently a lack of an account grounding the rights-bearing status of infants, developed an account of teleological potential to answer this lack and integrated it into a two-fold approach to moral status. This final section will consider two potential objections to this account.

The first potential objection derives from the issue of woman's rights and is directed against the fact that this account affirms fetal rights. In the words of Mary Anne Warren, "so long as the fetus remains within the woman's body, it is impossible to treat it as if it were already a person with full and equal moral rights, without at the same time treating the woman as if she were something less".<sup>45</sup> The idea is that granting fetuses rights would be a form of discrimination threatening the bodily autonomy of women, hence fetuses cannot be granted rights and any account that does so is sexist and misguided.<sup>46</sup>

Notice, however, that the mere fact that fetal rights may conflict with women's rights is no reason to suppose either that to grant fetal rights is to undermine women's autonomy, or to suppose that they cannot co-exist. Commonly accepted rights have the potential to conflict, but this is not normally taken to be a valid reason for denying that those rights exist. A's right to freedom of movement may conflict with B's property rights when A exercises her freedom by breaking into B's house, but that is no reason to deny A's right to freedom, only to judge that B's property rights should take precedence. Similarly, merely accepting fetal rights does not automatically override the rights of the mother. The fetus's moral status is but one factor informing the permissibility of

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<sup>45</sup> Warren (1985), p.102.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. Copelon, Zampas, Bruise & deVore. (2005).

abortion. Judith Jarvis Thomson, for example, argues for the permissibility of abortion even assuming the fetus has full moral status.<sup>47</sup> How the strength of the mother's right to bodily autonomy weighs against the fetus's right to life is both important and interesting, but falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Next, and more importantly for this paper, legal rights are distinct from intrinsic rights and rights-bearing status, although ideally the latter should inform the former. It seems that on a scale of moral fundamentality, the intrinsic moral status of the fetus is metaphysically prior to the permissibility of abortion which is prior to the laws of society, and so ideally, legal rights concerning abortion should be based on the ethics of abortion which in turn should be built upon how the moral status of the fetus weighs against the rights of the mother. To reason in reverse from the not uncontroversial positions that fetuses cannot be granted legal rights or that abortion must be permissible to the conclusion that the fetus therefore cannot intrinsically be a rights-bearer seems a dubious argumentative move, especially since it is possible to maintain that the fetus has rights-bearing status alongside a permissive view of abortion.

Next, a second objection to the account may be made based on its implications about the severely cognitively disabled. Although the account of teleological potential can maintain that the severely cognitively disabled have the teleological potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities in virtue of their humanity, and hence do possess rights-bearing status, it also seems committed to implying that the severely cognitively disabled are defective since they lack the characteristic rational way for human beings to flourish.

Perhaps, however, there may be room to resist the idea that the severely cognitively disabled are defective human beings while maintaining that for an adult human being to lack rationality is a defect. That is, one might allow that severe cognitive disability is a defect in the abstract but deny that this defectiveness is carried over to the individuals who possess it. As an analogy, consider the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, or "golden joinery", which involves repairing broken pottery with gold-dusted lacquer. Although the breaks are objectively flaws, in the finished product they are instead what makes the pot unique and beautiful. Moreover, the finished pot is not flawed. Similarly, we might allow that severe cognitive disabilities in the abstract are defects, but maintain that when instantiated in severely cognitively disabled people, they are

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<sup>47</sup> Thomson (1971).

part of what makes them who they are, and moreover, such people are not defective.

In order for the *kintsugi* analogy to work with respect to the severely cognitively disabled, however, a coherent story must be told about how the cognitively disabled flourish in a normatively human way that is not the typical rational way. It is not impossible that such a story could be told: for example, citing disability-positive testimony and the wide range of ways in which humans can pursue interesting and meaningful lives, Elizabeth Barnes has recently argued that physical disability is merely a different rather than a defective way of being; although deaf people lack the intrinsic good of hearing, there are also other goods in which they participate by virtue of their deafness, such as the experience of music through vibrations.<sup>48</sup> On this view, deafness is a way of experiencing life that cannot be summed up simply by the lack of hearing. If such a view can be extended to cognitive disability, the *kintsugi* analogy might be applicable.

Unfortunately, however, conceiving of severe cognitive disability as merely a different way of being seems rather in tension with the account from teleological potential. Whereas in the *kintsugi* example where the repaired breaks do not fundamentally undermine the main purpose of the bowl or the cup, whether this purpose is functional or purely aesthetic, the lack of rationality in an adult human being, on an account that holds that the *telos* of human beings is the rational way, does undermine the main *telos*. It seems impossible for a way that is not rational to achieve the *telos*, and so impossible for another way of flourishing to be as good as the rational way. Conversely, if one instead holds that the rational way is but one of the ways of human flourishing, rationality loses its special status as the human *telos*, which the account from teleological potential needs to maintain. Ultimately, therefore, the implication that the severely cognitively disabled fail to achieve the human *telos* seems to be a bullet the proponent of the account from teleological potential will have to bite. Crucially, however, the practical implications of this are muted since even if they do not actualize this potential, the severely cognitively disabled do still have the teleological potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities that grounds rights-bearing status.

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<sup>48</sup> Barnes (2016), p.57.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has developed an account of the moral status of infants and fetuses, arguing firstly that teleological potential for sophisticated cognitive capacities understood with reference to natural norms can ground their rights-bearing status, and secondly that moral status should be understood as two-fold and directed at either justice and charity, with infants typically having more charity-oriented moral status than fetuses. There may, however, be objections to this account deriving from women's bodily autonomy and the case of the severely cognitively disabled, and although I have suggested that women's autonomy need not be incompatible with fetal rights, I am not sure that this account can deny that the severely cognitively disabled fail to achieve the human *telos*.

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# A Solipsistic and Affirmation-Based Approach to Meaning in Life

Masahiro Morioka\*

## Abstract

In this paper, I make two arguments: 1) There is a solipsistic layer in meaning in life, which I call the “heart of meaning in life” (HML). The bearer of the heart of meaning in life is the solipsistic being. The heart of meaning in life cannot be compared with anything else whatsoever. 2) The heart of meaning in life can be dynamically incorporated into the affirmation of having been born into this world, which I call “birth affirmation.” There can be two interpretations of birth affirmation, the anti-anti-natalistic interpretation and the possible world interpretation. Birth affirmation can be an alternative to anti-natalism, which is destined to be frustrated in this universe.

## 1. Introduction

When you read the sentence “Mandela’s life is more meaningful than your life,” what do you think the singular word “your” specifically points to? You may say that the word indicates the reader of the sentence. Who, then, is that reader? Is it possible to actually name that reader? I would say that it is impossible to name the reader because in that sentence the singular word “you” points to “the solipsistic being,” the being that does not have a proper name. I argue that this solipsistic being is the true and genuine bearer of meaning in life.

In this paper, I am going to make two arguments:

- 1) There is a solipsistic layer in the meaning in life, which I call the “heart of meaning in life” (HML). The heart of meaning in life cannot be compared with anything else whatsoever.
- 2) The heart of meaning in life can be dynamically incorporated into the affirmation of having been born into this world, which I call “birth affirmation.”

This paper is a revised and extended version of my paper “Is Meaning in Life Comparable?: From the Viewpoint of ‘The Heart of Meaning in Life,’” which

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was published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* in 2015. You can see some overlapping content between my 2015 paper and this 2019 paper, although the contexts in which they appear are slightly different.

It was Viktor Frankl who implicitly introduced the ideas of the solipsistic being and birth affirmation to the discussion of meaning of life. I will first explain his idea of the solipsistic being.

## 2. Frankl and the Solipsistic Being

Frankl writes in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* as follows.

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life – daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.<sup>1</sup>

We can see in this text the core message of Frankl's approach to the question of meaning of life. He stresses that we have to stop asking for "the meaning of life in general," and instead realize that we are being questioned by life, daily and hourly, about "the meaning of life of ourselves who are actually living here and now."<sup>2</sup> Questions about the meaning of life are asked of each individual, by life.

It is "each individual" who has the responsibility to answer those life questions. Frankl gives an important description of the characteristics of "each individual" as follows.

When a man finds that it is his destiny to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task; his single and unique task. He will have to

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<sup>1</sup> Frankl (2011), p.62. Italics in the English edition.

<sup>2</sup> In the German edition of this book, Frankl calls this turn "Art kopernikanische Wende" (the way of Copernican turn). This term is omitted in the English edition.

acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe.<sup>3</sup> (Underline by Morioka)

The above sentences of the English edition are not a strict translation of the German text. Let us try a word-to-word translation of the underlined part, particularly, the meanings of the two words, “unique” and “alone.”

With this destiny full of suffering, so to speak, he stands in the whole universe only once and in an incomparable manner. (German: *er mit diesem leidvollen Schicksal sozusagen im ganzen Kosmos einmalig und einzigartig dasteht.*<sup>4</sup>)

Frankl stresses that the individual who has the responsibility for answering the life question is the one who stands “only once” and “in an incomparable manner” in the whole universe. I interpret Frankl’s words as follows: whatever suffering this individual may experience her life occurs only once in this universe and can never be repeated in any other way in the future, and the manner in which this individual exists in this universe is unique and can never be compared with anything whatsoever.<sup>5</sup> For Frankl, it is such an individual, who stands only once and in an incomparable manner in this universe, who is the bearer of meaning in life. Who, then, is this bearer?

My interpretation is that Frankl comes very close to a kind of solipsism in the context of meaning in life.<sup>6</sup> Here I am using the word “solipsism” in a positive way. Solipsism is normally considered to be the idea that there is only one person in the universe who has real inner-consciousness, that is, myself. Many people believe that this kind of solipsism is wrong because in that case all people other than myself must lack their own inner-consciousness, and this is completely absurd. I would like to call this type of solipsism, “the normal solipsism.”

There is another type of solipsism, however, which can shed a special light on the fundamental uniqueness of the first person, myself, and emphasize that

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<sup>3</sup> Frankl (2011), p.63.

<sup>4</sup> Frankl (2011), pp.118-119.

<sup>5</sup> Frankl writes as follows. “No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any destiny. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response.” Frankl (2011), pp.62-63.

<sup>6</sup> Frankl does not use the word “solipsism.”

the person who has this uniqueness exists absolutely alone, in complete solitude, in the whole universe. The number of this person is only one, and no other person exists in such a unique way. The key concept of this solipsism is aloneness, solitude, or oneness, not the existence of inner-consciousness or self-consciousness. Let us call this type of solipsism, “existential solipsism.”<sup>7</sup>

Existential solipsism teaches us that although there are many people in the universe, there is only one person, or being, that exists in a very special way which can never be shared by any other persons. I would like to call this being, “the solipsistic being.” Readers might think that every person in our society can be, or actually is, this solipsistic being, and thus that there are many solipsistic beings here and there. I am the solipsistic being, you are the solipsistic being, and she is the solipsistic being. Nevertheless, this reasoning is wrong. If there are plural solipsistic beings, they cannot be the solipsistic being because the number of the solipsistic being ought to be one, not many. Then, who is considered the solipsistic being in the context of existential solipsism?

Readers might also think that this is a question of indexicals. Yes, the question has a strong connection with indexicals, but we cannot reduce the central point of the solipsistic being merely to indexical-related problems. For example, the indexical “I” can be defined as the pronoun which we use when the subject talks about the subject herself recursively. However, this means that any person can point to oneself and say “I,” and as a result, there can be many “I”s in our society. This clearly shows that the indexical “I” is not the same as the solipsistic being because while the former can equally be applied to plural persons, the latter can never be applied to plural persons. I would like to stress again that the number of the solipsistic being can only be one.

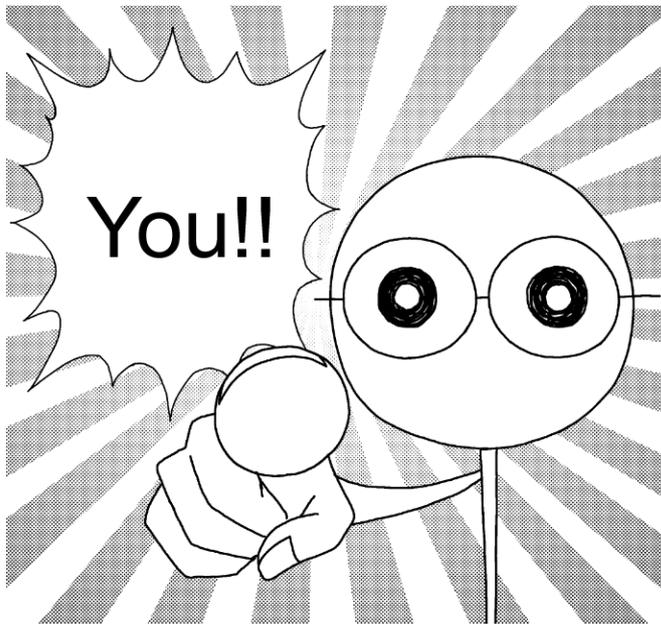
Readers might then ask me to explain who this solipsistic person actually is by using the proper name of a person. This is the crucial point. Interestingly, we cannot name who the solipsistic person actually is by using the proper name of a person. The author of this paper cannot name the solipsistic being by saying “Masahiro Morioka is the solipsistic being.” In the same way, the football player Lionel Messi cannot name the solipsistic being by saying “Lionel Messi is the solipsistic being.” Then, who is the solipsistic being?

One way of answering this question is to say that the person who is reading

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<sup>7</sup> The words “existential solipsism” are a translation of the Japanese term “独在論 dokuzai ron,” which can be literally translated as the “solo-existence theory.” I think that the latter would be a more appropriate translation, but for the time being, in this paper, I use the former.

this sentence just now is the solipsistic being, and in this way, we can directly point to the solipsistic being, and the place where this solipsistic being exists. The other way of answering this question is to use the second person pronoun “you” and say “Hey, reader, YOU are the solipsistic person!” However, using such written sentences may contain ambiguity in conveying the true meaning of the solipsistic being. In my Japanese book *Manga Introduction to Philosophy* (2013), I use a manga character and directly point to the solipsistic being.<sup>8</sup>



The being at which the finger of this manga character is now pointing is the solipsistic being. This shows that the solipsistic being can be directly pointed at by a combination of the direction of a fictional finger and the second person pronoun “you.” This is the most clear-cut and simple way of pointing to the solipsistic being.

The problem of the solipsistic being has been discussed among Japanese philosophers for more than 30 years, since the publication of the Japanese book *The Metaphysics of “I”* (1986) by Hitoshi Nagai. While Nagai seeks to interpret the problem of solipsity as that of haecceity and actuality, Morioka argues that since the solipsistic being can be directly pointed to in the above ways, the crucial point is the function of the second person pronoun in our language. Motoyoshi Irifuji argues that the whole picture should be seen from the

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<sup>8</sup> Morioka (2013b), p.165.

perspective of the dynamism of the “relative actuality” and the “absolute actuality.”<sup>9</sup>

In the following discussion I use the term “the solipsistic being,” but where the probability of misunderstanding is considered to be very low I sometimes use “I” instead of “the solipsistic being” and make the sentence more readable.

Let us go back to Frankl’s argument. I believe that what Frankl had in mind when he talked about the one who stands “only once” and “in an incomparable manner” in the whole universe was the solipsistic being I have discussed in the above paragraphs. The bearer of meaning in life is not the indexical “I” in a general sense. The bearer of meaning in life is the solipsistic being, which can be directly pointed to by a combination of the second person pronoun and the experience of being pointed to by a finger.<sup>10</sup>

In my 2015 paper, I called the meaning in life that is attained by the solipsistic being the “heart of meaning in life” (HML). The heart of meaning in life cannot be compared to anything, because since there is only one solipsistic being in the universe, there should be no heart of meaning in life that can be ascribed to any person other than the solipsistic being. Comparison is impossible at the level of the heart of meaning in life. This is the most important feature of HML.

When Frankl writes that “it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way.... ‘Life’ does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete ... No man and no destiny can be compared with any other man or any other destiny,”<sup>11</sup> he implicitly talks about the heart of meaning in life held by the solipsistic being, which I have discussed extensively in this section.

### **3. Two Kinds of Impossibility in the Comparison of Meaning in Life**

Thaddeus Metz argues that the theories of meaning in/of life can be divided

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<sup>9</sup> The discussion of this topic is now under way mainly in Japanese. You can read a rough sketch of Nagai’s argument in Nagai (2007-2010) and (2011-2014). The current discussion can be found in Irifuji and Morioka (2019) and subsequent books in the same series to be published in 2020 and 2021. I am now writing a paper on this topic in English. If you read Japanese please read the related Japanese papers and books that we have written.

<sup>10</sup> A similar perspective can be found in the philosophy of *Upanishad*, especially, in the famous phrase *Tat Tvam Asi* (You art that). We can also recall Saul Kripke’s “baptism” in his discussion of proper names in *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1972). I will discuss these topics in the future English papers.

<sup>11</sup> Frankl (2011), p.62.

into three categories: 1) super naturalism, 2) objectivism, and 3) subjectivism.<sup>12</sup> At first sight, existential solipsism looks very similar to subjectivism, but if we take a closer look at the difference between existential solipsism and subjectivism, it becomes clear that they are completely different from each other. We propose existential solipsism as the fourth category of meaning in/of life.

- \* Super naturalism (1)
- \* Naturalism
  - \* Objectivism (2)
  - \* Subjectivism (3)
  - \* Existential solipsism (4)

Super naturalism and objectivism argue that we can say that Person A's life is more meaningful than Person B's life. In these two categories, the meaning of one's life can be compared with the meanings of others' lives. On the other hand, subjectivism and existential solipsism argue that we cannot say that Person A's life is more meaningful than Person B's life. In subjectivism and existential solipsism, the meaning of one's life cannot be compared with the meanings of others' lives, but interestingly, the reason they cannot be compared is completely different.

Subjectivism thinks that the meaning of one's life can only be determined by that particular person herself, and other people outside her cannot determine the meaning of her life, thus the comparison between the meaning of one's life and the meanings of other lives should be impossible. The meaning of Person A's life can only be determined by Person A, the meaning of Person B's life can only be determined by Person B, and so on.

Existential solipsism does not think so, however. Existential solipsism argues that the heart of meaning in life, which is the only meaningful concept of meaning in life for existential solipsism, can only be determined by the solipsistic being itself. We have already discussed who this solipsistic being is. The number of the solipsistic being is only one. Therefore, from the perspective of existential solipsism, the only thing that can be meaningfully discussed in the context of meaning in life is the heart of meaning in life of the solipsistic being, and anything other than that cannot be meaningfully discussed. The heart of

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<sup>12</sup> Metz (2013).

meaning in the life of Person A cannot be meaningfully discussed, and the heart of meaning in the life of Person B cannot be meaningfully discussed. Only the heart of meaning in life of the solipsistic being can be meaningfully discussed. This is why the comparison between two or more people at the level of HML is logically impossible.

Imagine Hitler's life. Super naturalism and objectivism argue that we can talk about the meaning of Hitler's life objectively, and can compare it with, say, the meaning of Mandela's life. Subjectivism does not think so. According to subjectivism, we can talk about the meaning of Hitler's life, and for example, we may even say that Hitler's life might have been meaningful because he believed that he successfully flourished in his life in his own way until his last day. However, it is Hitler himself who can determine whether or not his life was actually meaningful. We cannot determine the meaningfulness of Hitler's life objectively from the outside.

Existential solipsism does not think so. According to existential solipsism, the concept of "the heart of meaning in life of Hitler" does not make any sense because the solipsistic being, which is the bearer of HML, cannot be pointed to by the name of a proper person, such as Hitler. The heart of meaning in life of Hitler does not make sense from the beginning, hence it cannot be compared with anything at all. There is no such thing as someone else's HML. HML is always the solipsistic being's HML.<sup>13</sup>

We have so far discussed who the bearer of meaning in life is, and have discovered that the heart of meaning in life can only be held by the solipsistic being. In other words, we can say that there is a layer of existential solipsism in the realm of meaning in life, and this layer is distinguished from other layers, such as the subjectivist layer and the objectivist layer, and it should be shed a special light on in the discussion of meaning in/of life.

Before going on to the next section, I would like to stress that the above discussion has involved the "bearer" of meaning in life, not the "content" of meaning in life. When thinking about the content of meaning in life, we should take the importance of human relationships into account and leave the negative solipsistic bias that the word solipsism may lure us into.

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<sup>13</sup> You may wonder, "Wasn't Hitler a solipsistic being when he was alive?" I would answer this question negatively because the solipsistic being cannot be pointed to using the proper name of a person.

#### 4. Meaning in Life and “Birth Affirmation”

Let us move on to a discussion of the content of the heart of meaning in life. Here I would like to convert the *meaning* question to the question of *affirmation*, and propose regarding the question of meaning in life as a question of the possibility of “birth affirmation.”

Frankl’s book, again, gives us a clue about how to think deeply about this topic. The original German title of *Man’s Search for Meaning* is “...trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen,” which can be translated as “*Nevertheless Say(ing) Yes to One’s Life.*” This phrase eloquently illustrates Frankl’s understanding of the meaning of the meaning of life. According to Frankl, we are being questioned by life, daily and hourly, about the meaning of our own life, we have a responsibility to answer that question, and “saying yes to one’s life” can be the most simple and fundamental answer to that question. Here we can see Frankl’s idea that the meaning of the meaning of life can be understood as the affirmation of one’s life, that is, saying yes to one’s life. In this idea we can also hear the resonance of Nietzsche’s concept, the affirmation of life in the form of eternal recurrence. Encouraged by Frankl, I would like to further develop his life-affirmation philosophy into a new way of interpreting the meaning of the meaning of life.

I would like to call this kind of approach, an “affirmation-based approach to the meaning in life.” I have long developed my own affirmation-based approach, the theory of birth affirmation, which is one of the affirmation-based approaches to the meaning in life, extensively in Japanese papers. I provide a summary of the main argument of the theory of birth affirmation in the following paragraphs.<sup>14</sup>

From my perspective, what gives the solipsistic being the heart of meaning in life is “the affirmation of the whole life” of the solipsistic being. What, then, does the affirmation of the whole life mean? It does not mean that the solipsistic being can affirm *every life event* it has experienced. Instead, it means that the solipsistic being can affirm what it has experienced up until the present *as a whole* even if there have been particular events that cannot be affirmed at all. This is my interpretation of the affirmation of the whole life.

Looking back on our lives, we find a number of life events to which we

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<sup>14</sup> I will write papers on birth affirmation in more detail in English in the near future.

cannot say yes, but this does not necessarily mean that our lives cannot be affirmed *as a whole*. Affirming a life *as a whole* means to affirm a life that contains, as its parts, many life events that cannot be affirmed. Let us take a specific example. The other day, one of my friends sent me an email saying that his most beloved friend had killed herself. He fell into despair and could not find a way to escape from this predicament. I did not know how to cope with this difficult situation either, and so I wrote to him to say that I really would like him to survive this difficult period. I wrote, “Of course, this painful life event cannot be affirmed at all, but if you can survive this painful period, it becomes logically possible in the future that you can look back on your life *as a whole* and come to think of it as something that can be affirmed from the bottom of your heart, although this particular life event itself will remain one that can never be affirmed by you.” This way of thinking is an example of separating particular life events from one’s life as a whole. I do not think that this kind of separation is always possible, especially in the case of harsh experiences. I am not such an optimist and I do not know how to achieve this separation effectively. My point is to show that this separation is *logically* possible, and the affirmation of life as a whole is *logically* possible, whatever predicament we may experience in our lives. I believe that in many cases a life that is affirmed as a whole contains some life events that cannot be affirmed as its parts.<sup>15</sup> To help people realize this logical structure is the role of philosophy, and to discover a concrete way to actually make this separation is the role of psychology. This is a place where philosophy and psychology can cooperate.

The role of philosophy in the theory of birth affirmation is: 1) to show that birth affirmation is logically possible in all cases, 2) to give a detailed analysis of the concept of birth affirmation, 3) to make clear the similarities and differences with other related concepts such as self-affirmation and life-affirmation, and 4) to make clear the social and cultural aspects of birth affirmation.

Let us think about the concept of “the whole life” again. Usually, the whole life means the whole period of time from the beginning of life (birth) to the end of life (death). This means that the affirmation of the whole life is possible only at the final end of one’s life, that is, at the moment of one’s death. Generally speaking, this is not a strange idea. Many people easily understand a sentence

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<sup>15</sup> This point needs further detailed scrutiny. I have discussed it in my Japanese papers.

such as “When she faced death, she looked back over her whole life and affirmed it from the bottom of her heart” however, the idea that in order to affirm the whole life we have to wait a long time for the time of death sounds very strange to me.<sup>16</sup>

My understanding of the concept of the whole life is completely different from the one above. I do not think that the whole life is the objective period of time that is determined by its beginning and its end. Roughly speaking, the whole life is the life that comes up to my mind when I try to look back at all my life events from here and now into the past, from the inside. Speaking more precisely, the whole life is a subjective picture that is constructed by the elements which come up in the solipsistic being’s mind when the solipsistic being tries to look back at all the past experiences of its actual life.

Since the whole life is a subjective picture, every time the solipsistic being looks back on its past experiences, its whole life appears differently in its eyes. The contents of the whole life which was looked back on one month ago and that which was looked back on yesterday are not the same, even in the overlapping period, that is, the period before one month.

The important thing is that when the solipsistic being affirms its life, what the solipsistic being affirms is this subjective whole life, as discussed above. This further implies that affirming the whole life in this sense is considered equal to *affirming the birth of the solipsistic being* into the world. I call this the “birth affirmation.” Birth affirmation is the judgement, made by the solipsistic being, that “I am glad that I have been born.” Please note that this is not “I am glad that *you* have been born” which parents sometimes say to their child. Birth affirmation means that “I am glad that *I* have been born.”

The theory of birth affirmation is not that which claims that every life has already been affirmed or that every life should be affirmed. It is the theory which claims that the life of the solipsistic being can be affirmed as a whole every time when it looks back on its life, until the last minute of its end.

Then, what is “affirmation”? What does it mean to affirm one’s life? My answer to these questions is as follows.<sup>17</sup>

Birth affirmation means either of the two following propositions.

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<sup>16</sup> There are many discussions on the whole life and the part life problem in the philosophy of meaning in life. See Metz (2013), pp.37-58.

<sup>17</sup> I have discussed this topic extensively in my Japanese papers.

- 1) Never to think, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better not to have been born. (*Anti-anti-natalistic interpretation*)
- 2) Even if there were a possible world in which my ideal was realized or my grave sufferings were resolved, never to think that, at the bottom of my heart, that it would have been better to have been born to that possible world. (*Possible world interpretation*)

The first proposition is the complete negation of anti-natalism, which has been advocated since ancient times and recently fervently supported by David Benatar. I call this proposition the “anti-anti-natalistic interpretation” of birth affirmation. (I discuss anti-natalism in the next section.) The second proposition can be interpreted as Morioka’s version of Nietzsche’s *amor fati*. Nietzsche talks about the concept of *amor fati* in *Ecce Homo* as follows. “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity.”<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche is the first advocate of the second proposition of birth affirmation. I call this proposition the “possible world interpretation” of birth affirmation. There is a close connection between these two propositions, and I have much to say about their characteristics, but there is not enough space for this discussion. I have to move on to the next topic here.

As I said before, according to the theory of birth affirmation, the whole life is a subjective picture. This means that birth affirmation is also a subjective affirmation made by the solipsistic being.<sup>19</sup> This shows that the theory of birth affirmation may be a variation of narrative approaches to meaning in/of life. This further shows that the theory of birth affirmation shares a certain risk with narrative approaches in general, that is to say, the risk of making self-righteous affirmative stories and giving the solipsistic being a narcissistic interpretation of an affirmed life. Of course, it is very hard to determine which story is narcissistic and which is not, however, if a story is narcissistic, that story cannot have the power to enrich the human relationship between the solipsistic being and its significant others. A birth affirmation made by the solipsistic being should thus be placed under a never ending process of inner examination until the last day of its life. (I think that this is what Socrates had in mind when he

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<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche (1967, 2000), p.714. Original German is “Meine Formel für die Grösse am Menschen ist *amor fati*: dass man Nichts anders haben will, vorwärts nicht, rückwärts nicht, in alle Ewigkeit nicht.”

<sup>19</sup> I am still wondering which words we should use, “subjective affirmation” or “solipsistic affirmation.”

used the words “examined life.”)

## 5. Anti-Natalism and Birth Affirmation

The theory of birth affirmation seems to be in direct opposition to anti-natalism. (I sometimes call anti-natalism *birth negation*.) There have been many anti-natalist theories in human history, for example those by Sophokles in ancient Greece and Arthur Schopenhauer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and the latest version of anti-natalism is David Benatar’s theory of “better never to have been.” He argues that coming into existence is always a harm, and therefore, the birth of sentient beings should have been avoided. According to his theory, any life that contains at least a very small drop of pain is logically worse than not having been born, and the badness of this life can never be compensated at all, no matter how much pleasure may be poured into life before and after the time of that tiny pain.

On the one hand, I do not think his argument is logically correct. Firstly, his premise that “the presence of pain is bad” is wrong even if that pain does not lead to future pleasure. For me, the presence of some bearable pain itself is not bad at all, and I do not think that this is a fundamentally flawed way of thinking. If this premise is wrong, every following argument by Benatar should be regarded as wrong, including his conclusion, “coming into existence is always a harm.” Secondly, his argument about counterfactual conditionals has a grave problem when he tries to compare the situation in which a sentient being has been born and the situation in which such thing has never occurred. He compares what cannot be compared. (I promise that I will discuss the latter problem in detail in my future paper.)

On the other hand, I really appreciate his book *Better Never to Have Been* because it succeeded in letting the eyes of analytic philosophers turn to the meaning of having been born, and to philosophical issues concerning the meaning of life in general.

Although I have advocated the theory of birth affirmation, it is also true that sometimes, and even now, I am deeply trapped in the thought of birth negation, that it is better never to have been. The reason I have advocated birth affirmation is that birth negation is one of the strongest *basso continuo* of my life and I really yearn to overcome it. Sometimes I think that the world in which Morioka had never been born would have been a better world, considering the pain and

suffering I have caused to my beloved ones.

At the same time, I cannot help thinking that if I had not been born at all, the happiness and enjoyment that my beloved ones have experienced with me would not have existed at all in this world. Isn't it insulting and immoral to *wish* such a thing on my beloved ones, who have shared the happiness and sorrow of life with me (even if it is a wish that cannot come true)?

However fervently I might wish, it is totally impossible to go back to the time of my birth and erase it from this world. Logically speaking, the wish of anti-natalists cannot be fulfilled. It is destined to be frustrated. Hence, the only thing that remains for the solipsistic being is to continue living its life toward the future, and to seek a way to attain the birth affirmation of the whole life. A birth affirmation might not take place, but it might take place, and the latter is not logically impossible. This is why surviving is strongly encouraged even when the solipsistic being groans with heartbreaking pain and suffering.

Hearing the words "birth affirmation of the solipsistic being," you may think that it is attainable only through the solipsistic being's struggle, without any support from surrounding people, but in many cases this is wrong. Support from surrounding people is very important for birth affirmation. Birth affirmation also contains, more or less, the affirmative attitudes of beloved ones toward their own lives, and those of other unknown people toward themselves. The affirmative attitudes of other people toward their lives has a positive influence on the birth affirmation of the solipsistic being, because the way that the solipsistic being looks at its own life is closely connected with how other people look at their lives. This is the place where the theory of birth affirmation meets ethics.

In the above paragraph, I used the words "the affirmative attitudes of beloved ones toward their own lives." This is because the words "birth affirmation" can only be applied, strictly speaking, to the solipsistic being. We should not use "birth affirmation" in the case of other people. At first, this way of thinking sounds very strange, but this is the logical conclusion of the theory of birth affirmation and existential solipsism.

When a person says, "I have had a birth affirmation!" how then should I interpret her words? It is clear that the person in question is not the solipsistic being, hence, her words "I have had a birth affirmation!" are wrong. Her words are not senseless, however. If I interpret her words as "I have finally got an affirmative attitude toward my whole life! I have come to be able to say yes to

my whole life!” then her words make sense without any ambiguity.

Before closing this paper, let me make a final comment on birth affirmation and the value of life. The solipsistic being may not be able to attain a birth affirmation in any instances of its entire life, however, even such a case does not mean that the whole life of the solipsistic being is of lower value than other people’s affirmed lives. The value of the life of the solipsistic being cannot be compared, in essence, to the value of any other person’s life, and it cannot be compared with any hypothetical, counterfactual lives of the solipsistic being itself because the solipsistic being has no hypothetical, counterfactual variants in this universe.

In this paper, I have illustrated the essence of a new approach, “the solipsistic and affirmation-based approach to meaning in life.” I am going to broaden this approach to make a systematic philosophical framework called “the philosophy of birth affirmation.”

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