

Truth and Meaning in Life

A Badiouan Theory of Meaning in Life

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Abstract

Owing to the analytic tradition, contemporary analytic existentialism deliberately avoids metaphysical discussions to the detriment of the field. Specifically, Thaddeus Metz' Fundamentality Theory invokes metaphysical categories without adequately clarifying what they really mean. This paper aims to remedy these problems by formulating a theory of meaning in life grounded on the metaphysical category of truth. Deriving from Alain Badiou's relevant writings, this paper formulates a theory of meaning in life based on a metaphysical notion of truth with the particular advantage of compensating for Fundamentality Theory's (1) lack of metaphysical grounding, and (2) the inherent vagueness of its two central notions: fundamentality and substantiality. I argue that the Badiouan Theory that this paper formulates opens up the field to the rich conceptual repertoire of metaphysics and that it designates substantiality as fidelity to truths, while designating truths as fundamental.

1. Introduction

The leading theory of meaning in life today is Thaddeus Metz' *Fundamentality Theory*. While this paper does not contend its advantages against its non-consequentialist rivals, one significant shortcoming of the theory is that it does not locate itself in broader philosophical debates outside analytic existentialism. More specifically, while the name itself invokes a metaphysical category, it deliberately avoids this thorny issue. In a more rudimentary formulation of the theory, Metz disavows the exploration of “traditional, supernaturalist view” that his proposed criteria are unified by “God’s higher-order purposes,”¹ which is clearly an allusion to traditional metaphysical problems. While this is a virtue in protecting the theory against possible criticisms, it needlessly ostracizes the field from more traditional philosophical discourses such as metaphysics. This deliberate isolation also leaves the already fragmented world of philosophy a little more fragmented. This paper aims to remedy this by

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¹ Metz (2011) p. 390.

proposing a theory of meaning in life based on the traditional metaphysical notion of truth, effectively reinserting metaphysical concerns in existentialist discussions. Such attempt is reminiscent of Heidegger's ontologico-existentialist concerns,² and potentially opening up the field to the rich conceptual repository of the history of Western philosophy, allowing for a semblance of unity in the whole of philosophy never again seen after the time of the ancients.

In this paper, I turn to one of the most influential philosophers today, Alain Badiou. A Marxist continental thinker³, Badiou concerns himself mainly with (meta)ontology⁴ and the so-called “conditions” of philosophy—art, science, politics, and love.⁵ While these conditions are of significance to any theory of meaning in life, Badiou does not explicitly tackle the question nor attempt to forward a theory on the subject matter. Because of this fact, one could immediately object that the project of the current paper is futile.

One of the key achievements of Thaddeus Metz' work is to consolidate the current literature on the subject⁶, but it is noteworthy how he usually derives theories of meaning in life from philosophers who practically did not write anything on the topic—or at least not explicitly. For instance, he ascribes an objective naturalism of sorts, i.e. the assertion that some natural features of life make it meaningful,⁷ to Karl Marx.⁸ With his materialist abhorrence of Hegelian Idealism, Marx would clearly be open to the idea that only natural features could account for meaning in life. This does not mean, however, that Marx actually devoted time to write about meaning in life as this is far from the concerns of emancipatory politics and capitalist societies. The nearest thing that he could have talked about would be his notion of “species being,”⁹ the nature of human beings that he claims to be constrained by capitalism, and the very same nature that he thinks would be liberated by communism. Whether Metz' assessment of Marx is qualified or not is beyond the scope of this paper. What I attempt to do, however, is the same: to explicate a theory of meaning in life from a philosopher who did

² Cf. Heidegger (1962).

³ Cf. Bosteels (2010).

⁴ From an outsider's perspective, what he clearly does is ontology. For Badiou, however, following the maxim “Mathematics is ontology,” philosophy has no business doing ontology. Therefore, while he appears to be doing ontology, to his own understanding of what he does, he is involved in *metaontology*.

⁵ See Badiou (2008).

⁶ Cf. Metz (2013), Metz (2011), Metz (2007), and Metz (2001).

⁷ Metz (2013) p. 180, Metz (2001) p. 139.

⁸ Metz (2013) p. 20.

⁹ Eagleton (2011) p. 81.

not, at least explicitly, provide a theory on the topic.

Badiou concerns himself with traditionally continental questions (e.g. the event, subjectivity, etc.) and it could be argued that his concerns are alien to the concerns of existentialism, more specifically to *analytic* existentialism. His importance in contemporary philosophy, however, including analytic philosophy, can no longer be denied. For instance, he claims that the publication of his first magnum opus, *Being and Event*, marks “the nullity of the opposition between analytic thought and continental thought.”¹⁰ The rigor of the mathematizations of *Being and Event* is surely attractive to analytic philosophers while the subject matter on which this was used was of course unwelcome. On the other hand, the subject matter of the book is a favorite among continental thinkers while its mathematizations would definitely be frowned upon. Another important aspect of Badiou’s philosophy is the resurrection of the centrality of truth (or more correctly, truths) in philosophical discourse. While it has been fashionable in early analytic thinkers to jettison truth to the scientists and in early continental philosophers to reduce it to interpretation,¹¹ Badiou was able to forward a mathematical model of truth without returning to a classical, strictly Platonic conception.

This only means, therefore, that Badiou’s thought goes perfectly well with the aims of this paper. Deriving from Badiou’s relevant writings, this paper formulates a theory of meaning in life based on a metaphysical notion of truth with the particular advantage of compensating for Fundamentality Theory’s (1) lack of metaphysical grounding, and (2) inherent vagueness of its two central notions: fundamentality and substantiality.

The attempt of this paper will begin by formulating a Badiouan Theory of meaning in life from his extant writings. I begin in the next section with his book, *The True Life*, where he comes nearest to the topic. Here I also discuss, albeit briefly, another *prima facie* related work of his, *Happiness*. In the third section, I defend that the Badiouan Theory is indeed a theory of meaning in life with the use of Metz’ criteria, i.e. that any theory of meaning in life talks about at least one of the following: (1) which ends are worth pursuing, (2) how our animal nature can be transcended, and (3) what merits esteem or admiration.¹² In the fourth section, I discuss the patent advantage of the Badiouan Theory, i.e. its ability to fill in the

¹⁰ Badiou (2005) p. xvii.

¹¹ Cf. Wittgenstein in TLP 4.11: “The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural science)” and Heidegger (1993).

¹² Metz (2013) p. 34.

vagueness of the Fundamentality Theory. I begin by discussing my allegation of vagueness to the Fundamentality Theory and provide reasons why the Badiouan Theory is able to evade them. Lastly, in the fifth section, I discuss three counterarguments that can be hurled against the Badiouan Theory. Here I discuss that the theory seems to admit the possibility of degrading sacrifice, an unredeemed anti-matter, and morally despicable acts. It should be noted that while this paper extensively discusses a conception of meaning in life and its concept, it deliberately excludes the equally controversial issue of the conceptual differences between meaningfulness and worthwhileness.¹³

2. A Badiouan Theory

While Badiou did not explicitly pursue an existentialist project, the existentialist undertones of his philosophy can be easily laid down. The nearest that he got to an existentialist project was in his book, *The True Life*. It is a short collection of different lectures that were all addressed to the youth. As a 79-year-old during the time of publication, Badiou provides his young audience with an analysis of the contemporary dilemmas that they are facing; he diagnoses the youth with a disorientation brought about by modernity's "abandonment of tradition."¹⁴ With the disintegration of feudal hierarchies, the naturalized tendency of man to respect these hierarchies was thrown away. The only alternative that contemporary capitalist society offers is Free Trade. The traditional, feudal world is singularly imposing while the contemporary capitalist world imposes nothing at all. For instance, while European monarchies in Medieval Times needed the Pope's blessing for their legitimacy, today's secularism pits all religions against all types of ideology. This vacuum created by too many choices and too much non-imposition is what Badiou diagnoses as the cause of the disorientation that the youth finds herself in today. As a result, the youth is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, the youth desires to get out of the demands of contemporary capitalist society and to find her own identity—to *burn*. On the other hand, the youth wants herself to be established and to be successful in her career, a subservience to societal standards—to *build*. This is therefore the dilemma between burning and building.

As a remedy, Badiou turns to Socrates. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates says that

¹³ Cf. Metz (2012).

¹⁴ Badiou (2017) p. 29.

only when citizens gain “true life” that they will be inspired to have “contempt for power and the State.”¹⁵ When such contempt has been exhibited, there is no longer any reason for citizens to abuse the government’s power for personal gain. This is because the true life ensures:

that young people don’t go down the paths already mapped out, that they are not just condemned to obey social customs, that they can create something new, propose a different direction as regards the true life.¹⁶

While this is not talk about meaningfulness per se, this can be read as an attempt at extending his philosophy to more existentialist concerns. The *true* life, he says, is characterized by a *radically new* creation. In Badiou’s metaontology, this is actually a tautology. I will explicate why.

First, a truth, for Badiou, is a “hole in knowledge,”¹⁷ triggered by what he calls an *event*. An event happens in an evental site, a site within the situation which is at the edge of the void.¹⁸ Being at the edge of the void only means that the site has no common elements with the situation it is in. This is why within the situation, an event is radically new because no one would have expected it to happen. The event, therefore, is a radically new happening which is unprecedented, indiscernible, undecidable, and unnameable.¹⁹ An event is such because it collects its elements from a site where the situation is blind. Badiou’s classic example is the French riots of May 1968²⁰ of which he was part. These were spontaneous, decentralized, and unprecedented series of student demonstrations

¹⁵ *Republic* 502-521c as quoted in Badiou (2017) p. 6. The translation here is particularly interesting as this quote is directly lifted from Badiou’s very own translation into French of Plato’s *Republic* (2012), rendered into English by Susan Spitzer. The problem, however, is that Badiou does not call it a translation but a *hypertranslation*. This means that Badiou did not make fidelity to the original Greek text as the primary consideration; he deliberately altered the translation in accordance to how he reads Plato. In Grube and Reeve’s translation (1992), the closest phrase associated with this can be found in 512b where Socrates asks Glaucon, “Can you name any life that *despises political rule* besides that of the true philosopher?” [emphasis added]

However far from the original, this quote from Plato still drives home Badiou’s point: the true life, exhibited by that of the philosopher, is not subservient to current governing systems. While Plato intended this to be a critique of the popular democracy of his time that led to the execution of his teacher, Badiou contextualized the same contempt for the State through “hypertranslating” 512b into our current context, under a post-Medieval capitalist global order.

¹⁶ Badiou (2017) p. 8.

¹⁷ Badiou (2005) p. 558, Badiou (2008) p. 13.

¹⁸ Badiou (2005) p. 182.

¹⁹ Badiou (2004) p. 61.

²⁰ Badiou (1992) p. 84.

all over France which were widely successful in halting the French economy. While no one expected it to occur, it was an insistent resistance against the political situation's utter disregard of it. The May 1968 event in Paris was an event in the Badiouan sense, and therefore the starting point of truth. Badiou schematizes an event in the following way:

$$e_X = \{ x \in X, e_X \}^{21}$$

This formulation is read as: “an event e of a situation X contains as its elements, elements of X and the event, e_X , itself.” While an event happens in an evental site, an event is still part of the situation it is in. Hence, the elements from which it is created are elements from the situation itself. It is also important to note that an event is self-containing. This self-containment means that the event is only recognizable from within the event itself. From without, the event does not seem to exist. It is therefore important for an event to be seized from within itself, by a subject. If it weren’t properly seized, it loses its eventness.

It is clear, therefore, that an event is inherently fleeting in nature. It is therefore reliant on a *subject* to *decide* its existence.²² When an individual decides an event, keeps collecting elements for it, and devoting herself to it, the individual undergoes the process of subjectivization. This process of post-decision element-collection, and devotion is called *fidelity*. The subject, therefore, is tied to the process of fidelity in maintaining the event—discerning it, and thereafter naming it—into a procedure of truth. This process of event, evental decision, fidelity, and naming constitute the process which Badiou calls *truth*.

The true life, therefore, is essentially new because it is *true*. It is a process stemming from an event which is a rupture from the situation. And since there are four domains in which truth could take place—love, science, art, and politics—the true life can be led in any of these domains. The same fidelity is involved in an artist painstakingly working on an artwork like an impressionist painting, or a modernist poem. These are radically new creations by the subject from an event. It can be asked, however, under what criteria can one recognize truths? As a summary of the preceding discussion, the following questions could provide a set of guidelines:

²¹ Badiou (2005) p. 188.

²² Badiou (2005) p. 451.

- 1) Was it initiated by an unprecedented event?
- 2) Does it have a faithful subject?
- 3) Is it somewhat indiscernible in the situation it is in?

If a certain procedure satisfies the three abovementioned questions, then it can be said to be true. A love, for instance, can be true if and only if: (1) it began with a love-encounter, (2) it maintains the fidelity of both lovers, and (3) it only makes the most sense for the lovers. On the other hand, a love cannot be true, if it is, for instance, a product of a potion or a hypnosis. In such a case, the love in question would fail to satisfy the eventness of the encounter required in (1). If it is an arranged marriage, it could also not be true for it would fail to satisfy (3): it would only make sense for the arrangers and not even for the lovers.

Going back to the earlier dilemma, this does not mean that the true life is already a choice to *burn*. On the contrary, the true life lies in the middle of burning and building: it is a burning that builds. As an event builds from the elements of a situation, the true life builds from what remains of the burning. The procedure of fidelity is essentially a building process as it “distinguishes and gathers together the becoming of what is connected to the name of the event.”²³ While it is prohibited by the situation, fidelity builds the set from elements that are connected to the event into building what is called a *generic* set.²⁴ Genericity is a term borrowed from set theory where a set is generic if it avoids at least one mode of determination of the situation.²⁵ In other words, a generic set might not completely make sense to whoever comes from the situation. A truth, therefore, is characterized by the generic set: a prohibited, unrecognized set by the situation which is created by a forcing of the subject through the process of fidelity. As a generic set, a truth, therefore, does not make much sense from the perspective of the situation. A truth is a burning that builds.

Intuitively, it seems that living the true life is living a meaningful life, yet Badiou does not explicitly avow this position. There may be another work that fits the bill in dealing with the meaningful life, Badiou’s work entitled *Happiness*. As a systematic thinker, Badiou is able to tie up all aspects of his philosophy under a single (meta)ontological framework. Hence, his discussion of happiness is also

²³ Badiou (2005) p. 539.

²⁴ Badiou (2005) p. 357.

²⁵ Badiou (2005) p. 541.

tied to his notion of truth as he defines it as “the infallible sign of all access to truth.”²⁶ It is therefore a necessary part of the true life that it is happy for it is in the process of fidelity itself that the subject finds happiness. There is, therefore, no other notion in the Badiouan corpus that comes close to the question of meaning in life. Moreover, happiness is merely corollary to a Badiouan Theory of meaning in life, as a necessary consequence of living a true life. A Badiouan Theory should therefore take truth as its central concept. I formulate the theory thus:

(BTM) A human person’s life is meaningful if it is a true life.

While this fully encapsulates the preceding discussion, such formulation needs to be further explicated for the conditions for meaningfulness to surface. Hence, BTM can be reformulated thus:

(BTM₂) A human person’s life is meaningful if it is a true life, i.e. a life characterized by an engagement to a process of fidelity to at least one generic truth.

While Badiou admits that there are pluralities of truths, it would set too high a standard if the theory would require fidelity to multiple truths. Besides, this is also a question of quantifying truths which Badiou would take up in later works, which this paper would no longer delve into. It is, however, a useful assumption for our purposes to assume that truths are quantifiable in the sense that at least one truth is recognizable to be singular. BTM₂ therefore claims that fidelity to even a single truth is sufficient for meaningfulness.

At this point, it can now be clearly seen that BTM₂ is an *objective naturalist* theory. This is evident in Badiou’s insistence that truths are material, evidenced by the fact that they are subjective creations in material situations. While the term “subjective” has been repeatedly used in the preceding discussion, it need not be confused with the term “subjective” in subjective naturalism. While subjective naturalism insists on the sufficiency of subjectively set purposes for meaning, BTM₂ insists that these truths are distinct from the subject. While a subject *decides* an event’s existence, a subject does not *create* the event. Hence, even with the

²⁶ Badiou (2019) p. 35.

decisive role of the subject, BTM₂ remains an objective naturalist theory of meaning in life.

3. A Theory of Meaning in Life

I now turn to defending BTM₂ as a theory of meaning in life, and not of anything else. In an earlier paper, Metz attempted to explicate what a theory of meaning in life is about. He observed that philosophers have respectively reduced the question of meaning into three broad categories: purposiveness, transcendence, and esteem. First, he showed that purposiveness does not exhaust the question of meaning by arguing that meaning is not purely teleological but can also be deontological.²⁷ Secondly, transcendence does not exhaust the concept of meaning either because a pursuit of an internal value, which is hardly an instance of transcendence, can still be considered meaning-conferring.²⁸ Lastly, esteem does not exhaust the concept either since it is not logically contradictory to suppose that a meaningful life may not invite esteem or admiration.²⁹ He concluded the paper by saying that “there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory to be about meaning as opposed to something else.”³⁰ This means that there is currently no unified concept of meaning that the field is talking about.

His position, however, has changed later on albeit his analysis remained the same. In his book, *Meaning in Life*, he branded the previously discussed reductions as *monist analyses* of meaning in life,³¹ replacing the term “esteem” with “apt emotions,” in what I suspect is an attempt to broaden the last category. Following his 2001 paper, Metz likewise concludes that they ultimately fail in their attempts to reduce the question of meaningfulness to a single question.³² One of the non-starters that he cites is Wittgenstein’s insistence that the talk of meaning can be reduced to a talk of God.³³ While this claim by Wittgenstein seems more complicated than it looks, it is obvious that the question of meaningfulness is more than just any single question. But the conclusion in

²⁷ Metz (2001) pp. 140-145.

²⁸ Metz (2001) pp. 145-147.

²⁹ Metz (2001) pp. 147-150.

³⁰ Metz (2001) p. 150, Metz (2013) pp. 33-34.

³¹ Metz (2013) pp. 24-34.

³² Metz (2013) p. 24, also see Metz (2001).

³³ Metz (2013) p. 23.

Meaning in Life is much more substantial than the negative one in 2001. Instead of an outright dismissal of necessary and sufficient conditions for meaning, Metz now forwards a “family resemblance approach.”³⁴

He now claims that a theory of meaning in life actually answers the following *overlapping* questions, making it a real family resemblance approach: (1) which ends are worth pursuing, (2) how to transcend our animal nature, and (3) what merits esteem or admiration.³⁵ These three questions will now serve as guide in proving that BTM₂ is indeed a theory of meaning in life. In this section, I claim that BTM₂ talks about all three.

First, BTM₂ contends that the ends that are worth pursuing are obviously *truths*, which for Badiou can only be one of four: scientific/mathematical, artistic/poetic, political, or amorous. These four are specifically picked because it is only in these domains that generic truths can spring up. For instance, the lives of Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela, examples often cited by Metz,³⁶ can be considered meaningful because of their fidelity to truths. Mother Teresa dedicated her life to taking care of the sick and dying, which is the generic truth of radical mercy and compassion. While Badiou does not recognize religious truths, the truths to which Mother Teresa was faithful could be considered political, even amorous. Mother Teresa’s love of the poor and suffering is indeed a generic truth procedure. Nelson Mandela, on the other hand, committed himself in ending apartheid in South Africa—a fidelity to the truth of emancipatory politics. On the other hand, a life spent in an orgasmatron would not count as meaningful because there is no truth that is given birth here. Pleasures are functions of knowledge while truth bores a hole in knowledge. In other words, pleasure is dictated by current modes of determination because nothing new is produced. In pleasure, we only replicate what is expected of our biology and psychology.

This now leads us to the second condition: that a theory of meaning in life talks about a certain transcendence of our animal nature. Metz has been explicit that only a rational nature geared towards fundamentality is meaning-conferring.³⁷ The reason behind this is that the satisfaction of base desires *alone* does not seem to confer much meaning. In BTM₂, the key to establishing this transcendence of animalistic nature is the process of fidelity.

³⁴ Metz (2013) p. 34.

³⁵ Metz (2013) p. 34, Metz (2011) p. 401, and Metz (2003) pp. 64-65.

³⁶ See Metz (2015), Metz (2013), also Metz (2011).

³⁷ Metz (2013) pp. 222-223.

It is Badiou's conviction that human action thinks. His attempt has always been to explicate the rationality of *praxis*, or human action, by providing the mathematical complexities of historical change instigated by subjective intervention. Fidelity involves a decision on the part of the subject, deciding whether the event has happened or not. Clearly, Badiou's notion of fidelity cannot be fulfilled by a non-human animal. It is only with a rational capacity that one can distinguish elements from one another and gather them together into a single category, i.e. into the event in question. Does this mean, therefore, that BTM₂ excludes the possibility of animal lives being considered meaningful? This would certainly throw stones at contemporary objective naturalists like Peter Singer and even Thaddeus Metz himself.

Metz, in a more rudimentary version of his Fundamentality Theory then called *Transcending the Animal Self Theory* or TAST,³⁸ admits the possibility of a dog leading a meaningful life by virtue of her saving her master.³⁹ While this seems contradictory given the name of the theory, Metz admits the possibility of a dog's meaningful life because his heroic act of saving her master can be considered a form of transcending her animal self. While such act is admittedly commendable, this seems to be helplessly anthropomorphic. As discussed, the transcendence of the animal self is precisely a function of reason and in this regard, the dog could have exhibited certain rational capacities such as decisiveness and courage in saving her master. This, however, is questionable since such ascription of transcendence, more so rationality, to the dog is, again, anthropomorphic. If we are indeed to recognize the inherent worth of non-human species, ascribing anthropomorphic characteristics to them is a denial, and not a promotion, of their inherent worth. Hence, instead of uplifting the dog for being rational, and ergo human-like, one has to evaluate their lives on the basis of their own criteria, the epistemology of which is beyond our reach.⁴⁰ While this is an obviously controversial claim, suffice it to say that BTM₂ *prima facie* does not allow for animals to lead a meaningful life on the assumption that we do not know whether they are capable of being faithful to truths. Whether this assumption is correct or not may be the subject of future research.

On the other hand, Badiou talks about the subject as being essentially tied to

³⁸ Metz (2003) p. 65.

³⁹ Metz (2003) pp. 65-66.

⁴⁰ Cf. Wittgenstein's discussion on animals' forms of life in *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (formerly PI Part II) or PPF i.1. and PPF xi.327.

fidelity itself: “I will call *subject* the process itself of liaison between the event (thus the intervention) and the procedure of fidelity (thus its operator of connection).”⁴¹ The subject, therefore, is a subject only by virtue of its fidelity to truths. If BTM₂, however, adopts this essential embeddedness of the subject to fidelity, would this make the theory too broad as to include *all* human subjects regardless of the lives they live? Are not all living human beings faithful to at least one generic truth? In other words, are not all human beings subjects in their own right?

This seems to be contrary to the aims of a theory of meaning in life as the Badiouan Theory cannot seem to discriminate between meaningful and non-meaningful lives. But Alain Badiou admits the possibility of being a human being without necessarily being a subject: he admits that “out of these registers, there is only *existence*, or *individuality*, but no subject.”⁴² Her composition as subject is characterized as a “particular route, a sustained break, and it is very difficult to know how this composition is to be superimposed upon or combined with the simple perseverance-of-self.”⁴³ A subject, therefore, is rare and being a subject is worthy of admiration. The Badiouan Theory therefore holds that a life lived faithful to truths, lets itself transcend one’s animal nature and thus lead a meaningful life. This leads me to the last condition.

Badiou, in his short essay *Philosophy for Militants*, calls on a figure who can genuinely represent genericity, a figure who is generic as well. He traces the history of this figure from the ancient warrior whose achievements are of his own, fighting for a divine destiny. The warrior then evolved into the soldier, the anonymous fighter for the abstract nation.⁴⁴ He therefore calls for the soldier’s successor who would be anonymous as the soldier was but represents generic truths for the whole of humanity—this is the figure of the *hero*.⁴⁵ The genuinely generic figure, therefore, is the hero. While in this context, Badiou only talks about the hero in politics, we can extend this into other realms into saying that subjectivity is heroism. It is therefore worthy of esteem—a heroism—to remain faithful to truths. Moreover, it is only in fidelity to truths that one can achieve happiness.⁴⁶ If we then agree with Aristotle that happiness is the greatest good,

⁴¹ Badiou (2005) p. 252.

⁴² Badiou (1992) p. 108.

⁴³ Badiou (2012a) p. 46.

⁴⁴ Badiou (2012b) pp. 46-47.

⁴⁵ Badiou (2012b) p. 45.

⁴⁶ Badiou (2019) p. 85.

we also agree that a happy life is a life worthy of admiration.

4. Advantages

In several of his works, Metz provides a taxonomy of theories of meaning in life currently available in the literature.⁴⁷ Metz locates the Fundamentality Theory under the objective naturalist category and the most mature account of this is found in his 2013 book, *Meaning in Life*. The theory is quoted in full below:

(FT₃) A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she, without violating certain moral constraints against degrading sacrifice, employs her reason and in ways that either positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence, or negatively orient it towards what threatens them, such that the worse parts of her life cause better parts towards its end by a process that makes for a compelling and ideally original life-story; in addition, the meaning in a human person's life is reduced, the more it is negatively oriented towards fundamental conditions of human existence or exhibits narrative disvalue.⁴⁸

He argues that a life, which may include certain negative events, dedicated to so-called “fundamental conditions,” is a meaningful life. He points out the role of certain negative and value-negating life events in meaningfulness which he calls *anti-matter*. Anti-matter does not include the amount of time in a life spent asleep as this neither confers nor negates meaning,⁴⁹ but only certain negative life events such as blowing up the Sphinx⁵⁰ or torturing people for fun.⁵¹ FT₃ is conscious that anti-matter could potentially render one's life meaningless but that they may be allowed so long as they contribute to a more appealing narrative or to the benefit of the fundamental conditions themselves. In other words, we could say that anti-matter should be *redeemed*.

Although it remains as the best available theory, FT₃ needs to answer certain glaring issues. The first of the criticisms that has already been hurled against the

⁴⁷ Cf. Metz (2013), Metz (2011), Metz (2007), and Metz (2001).

⁴⁸ Metz (2013) p. 235.

⁴⁹ Metz (2013) p. 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Metz (2013) p. 234.

theory is that fundamentality seems to be insufficient for meaning.⁵² For instance, knowing that $1 + 1 = 2$, while fundamental, cannot give much meaning to a life. Metz responds to this by saying that not just any “bare fact of rationality directed towards a fundamental object”⁵³ is required. A “*substantial* contouring of one’s intelligence towards such an object”⁵⁴ is needed. First and foremost, for whom is it substantial? Landau argues that the most defensible interpretation of substantiality would be “depending on [each person’s] abilities and education.”⁵⁵ Metz, however, rightly rejects this interpretation as it practically reduces FT₃ into a subjective naturalist theory,⁵⁶ running contrary to the objective naturalist classification of Metz of his own theory.⁵⁷ The question of the meaning of “substantiality,” therefore, is still an open question.

Moreover, what does it mean for a contouring to be substantial? In a rejoinder to Landau, Metz provides us an idea of how rationality may be considered as “substantially engaged”: “working hard and in a sophisticated manner, and it must be contoured towards a particular object, namely, one fundamental to human life.”⁵⁸ While working hard and sophistication both provide an insight to what substantiality is, it remains to be a question which acts would count as one of these. As Landau has pointed out, this train of thought leads us to conclude that not only people like Einstein would have meaningful lives but even the freshman Physics student who studies his works.⁵⁹ Metz admits this lapse in the theory and proposes that a certain level of “advancement” is needed to differentiate lives with greater meanings such as Einstein’s from those with less such as that of the freshman Physics student.⁶⁰ While the notion of advancement might help in further qualifying substantiality, this issue is far from being settled. This lack of resolution only proves the inherent vagueness in Metz’ notion of substantiality. In a sense, the process of clarification only leads the theory to invoke other notions that only need further qualification.

Secondly, there is a fundamental problem in Metz’ notion of fundamentality. Fundamentality can be understood in two ways: metaphysically and

⁵² Landau (2013) p. 511, Metz (2015) p. 118.

⁵³ Metz (2013) p. 236.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Landau (2013) p. 507.

⁵⁶ Metz (2015) p. 119.

⁵⁷ Metz (2013) p. 12.

⁵⁸ Metz (2015) p. 115.

⁵⁹ Landau (2013) p. 507.

⁶⁰ Metz (2015) p. 119.

epistemologically.⁶¹ Epistemologically, a judgment is fundamental when it *takes into account* other judgments in a context. Metaphysically, an event is fundamental when it *brings about* other events.⁶² Fundamentality, therefore, accounts for succeeding objects in a certain causal chain and sometimes certain judgments or beliefs. While ambiguity can easily be alleged here, this paper notices an inherent *vagueness* in the concept as well.

Consider, for instance, the equation $1 + 1 = 2$. It is a fundamental principle of arithmetic, but is it significant enough to become meaning-conferring? Metz describes fundamentality as “that of conditions that are largely responsible for many other conditions in a given domain.”⁶³ This means that while the necessary condition of X is necessary for X to obtain, it is not necessarily a fundamental condition. On the other hand, the fundamental condition of X is *responsible* for the obtaining of X. Although this clearly differentiates fundamentality from necessity, it still does not qualify what fundamentality really is. Does this mean that fundamental conditions of X are *causes* of X? Metz implies that they are.⁶⁴ Metz gives the example of Mother Teresa’s compassion to sick and dying persons. When she tended to them, the resulting well-being was *responsible* for these people’s subsequent actions and decisions, making Mother Teresa’s life oriented towards the *fundamental condition* of people’s health. In other words, their health *caused* them to do and decide everything else that followed their ill conditions. If this is the case, then FT₃ is helplessly in need of a metaphysical discussion to ground the concept of causality, and by extension, of fundamentality. What does it mean for a fundamental condition to *cause* X? What does it mean for a condition to be *fundamental* or *responsible*?

There is therefore a need to further substantiate the “substantial” requirement of fundamentality. Moreover, there is a need to locate these notions shown to be important in analytic existentialism in more traditional metaphysical debates. What does it mean for a certain condition to be deemed “fundamental”? I argue that BTM₂ is able to address these two striking issues precisely by being more explicit in its metaphysics.

First, it evades any allegation of vagueness of the term “substantial” which

⁶¹ Metz (2013) p. 226.

⁶² “Events” here should be understood as broadly as possible as Metz, at least in his extant writings, is not conscious of the underpinnings of this term in continental philosophy, especially in Badiouan philosophy which is the subject matter of this paper.

⁶³ Metz (2013) p. 226, see also Metz (2011) p. 402.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

was used to describe the contouring of one's life to fundamental conditions. BTM₂ does not, in any way, put primacy on the notion of substantiality because it does not need to. It already presupposes the notion of fidelity as the mode of contouring of the self towards these conditions. Hence, whatever FT₃ meant as substantial contouring, BTM₂ has already qualified as the procedure of fidelity. In this aspect, therefore, BTM₂ provides no vagueness whatsoever; it is clear that the *substantial* act characteristic of the subject's contouring to fundamental conditions is the procedure of fidelity.

More importantly, BTM₂ is able to further clarify what it means for a condition to be fundamental. While Metz contents himself with calling these conditions "fundamental," the reason for their fundamental status is not clear. BTM₂, however, asserts that truths, being essential to meaningfulness, are building processes and are therefore fundamental. Any process of fidelity collects the elements of an event from the situation it is in. An event only happens in an evental site which, as discussed earlier, is at the edge of the void. Why is a site at the edge of the void? This is simply because the intersection of an evental site with the situation it belongs to is empty. In other words, the evental site does not share any elements with the situation it is in.

In set theory, there is an assurance that every situation has an evental site, making it *possible* for an event to happen in any situation at all. This assurance is given to us by the axiom of foundation: "Every non-void multiple contains some Other."⁶⁵ While we do not know if an event will ever or did happen, we know that there is a site in each situation where an event *could* happen. Every day, a revolution might start, a scientific discovery might take place, or we could fall in love. More importantly, the axiom of *foundation* assures us that the site is *fundamental* to the situation. It is therefore the possibility of an event that is fundamental—the same event that begins a truth. It is therefore in the evental site that truth grounds its being; events, as starting points of truths are *fundamental* to truth.

This discussion on the axiom of foundation only proves that there is, again, no vagueness involved in BTM₂'s notion of fundamentality. If truths begin with events and events happen in an evental site assured by the axiom of foundation, the foundation of the situation seems to be rooted in truths. In other words, for BTM₂, truths remain fundamental. While FT₃ still needs to clarify its notion of

⁶⁵ Badiou (2005) p. 195.

fundamentality, BTM₂ already provides a very clear notion of what it is to be fundamental with the repertoire of concepts from mathematics, owing to its explicit metaphysical underpinnings.

Interestingly, it is not just the event that is fundamental to truth. Truth itself is also *fundamental* to subjectivity. For Badiou, a subject does not exist before an event. A subject can only *be* because of its fidelity to the event as “the process of truth *induces* a subject.”⁶⁶ Hence, truth is shown here to be fundamental to subjectivization.

Most importantly, BTM₂’s emphasis on the notion of truth signifies a return to a more metaphysical approach to the existentialist question. While I do not wish to return to a Heideggerian approach in doing existentialism, this is an important step in bridging certain discordant discourses in philosophy today. First, with the notion of truth, BTM₂ connects analytic existentialism to metaphysics. Although this connection was unimaginable during the inception of analytic philosophy, the latter has seen unimaginable changes as well such as the rise of analytic existentialism itself.⁶⁷ The field is young, as pointed out by Metz,⁶⁸ while the metaphysical tradition is as old as philosophy is. This opens up the budding field to the repertoire of concepts metaphysics has stacked up for the last thousands of years. Secondly, with the notion of truth still, BTM₂ is able to connect analytic philosophy in general to continental philosophy. The fragmentation of philosophy into two hostile traditions may have been the most unfortunate product of Modern Philosophy in Western thought. In invoking the Badiouan concept of truth, BTM₂ opens up analytic philosophy to traditionally continental subjects such as subjectivity, event, and being *qua* being. While the bridges that BTM₂ has potentially made may be unwelcome to some, it is undeniable that because of these, BTM₂ opens a new field of research. Succeeding articles can be written on the relationship between the event and meaningfulness, freedom and meaningfulness, and the supernaturalists’ response to a completely objective naturalist account of meaning in life grounded in immanent truths.

5. Counterarguments

With the preceding discussion, we are able to formulate BTM₂ and defend that

⁶⁶ Badiou (2012a) p. 43.

⁶⁷ Espiritu (2019) p. 54.

⁶⁸ Metz (2013) p. 1.

it is indeed a theory of meaning in life. Moreover, the previous section provided reasons to prefer this theory over the currently accepted theory today, FT₃. While substantive, BTM₂ has yet to encounter criticisms. This section is devoted to these.

Let me first discuss the patent disadvantages of BTM₂ compared to FT₃. It is indeed glaring that BTM₂ lacks many features present in FT₃. For instance, FT₃ explicitly prohibits the possibility of “degrading sacrifice,” requires a “compelling and ideally original life story” in order to justify anti-matter, and mandates that fundamentality outweighs anti-matter. With the blatant disregard of these safeguards, does this mean that BTM₂ allows: (1) degrading sacrifice, and (2) *unredeemed anti-matter*?

I first contend that a degrading sacrifice is not in itself an anti-matter. This can be seen with the case of Jesus: while he allowed himself to be crucified naked after being mocked and spat on while carrying his own cross, one can hardly deny that he lived a meaningful life. Hence, if we deny that degrading sacrifice and meaningfulness can go together, we might as well deny the meaningfulness of Jesus’ life. I submit that even to the non-religious, this is a counterintuitive conclusion.

While the previous response is a very controversial one, I propose another response. Badiou is explicit in the independence of truth to the logic of the situation it is in. Because of the radicality of its break from the situation, the truth becomes unrecognizable from the situation. Hence, the standards for goodness, or of what is ethical, within the truth, is completely determined by the truth. Badiou summarizes the ethical dictum as “Keep going!” or “Continue!”⁶⁹ In a way, what is ethical is to continue the path to fidelity to a truth. Therefore, whatever is degrading, and therefore unethical, in Badiouan terms at least, can never come from a fidelity to truths. Moreover, if fidelity to truths induces a subject, infidelity to these truths would only entail the demise of the subject. What else is more degrading than the ceasing of the subject as subject? Hence, the mere fidelity to truth of the subject evades the possibility of a degrading sacrifice altogether.

Furthermore, I argue that the mere fidelity to truths should already “redeem” whatever anti-matter has been left behind in a life. Metz carefully safeguarded FT₃ against what I call the problem of *unredeemed anti-matter*. Consider for instance a person who was once a drug dependent who successfully overcame her addiction but later on reverted back to her old abhorrent ways. To exclude this life

⁶⁹ Hallward (2012) p.xi.

from meaningfulness, Metz had to add the extra safeguard of not exhibiting a “narrative disvalue”⁷⁰ only because the redemption needed for meaning is not inherent in the notion of fundamentality. He later on admits that this addition still lacks adequate qualification.⁷¹

When it comes to BTM₂, however, such safeguard is not necessary and at most redundant. Since it has been clear that an event, as a starting point of truths, is a rupture from the situation, fidelity to it means that there is no going back. To use the famous Allegory of the Cave, the philosopher’s return to the cave is no longer a return of a prisoner but of an altogether different person—the event of the encounter of the outside world has changed her forever.⁷² Badiou characterizes evental fidelity as “a *real* break (both thought and practised) in the specific order within which the event took place (be it political, loving, artistic, or scientific...).”⁷³ The person who falls in love truly, for instance, can never see the world the same way again; she now sees it in the perspective of the both of them. The person who begins her life as a political activist can also never see the world the same way again; she cannot fight for a revolution without having to see the world differently. These examples seem to go hand in glove to the requirements of FT₃ of a “compelling” and “ideally original” life story as if these lives were made to be adapted into a novel or an HBO series. But I think it is obvious that not all meaningful lives would make good novels; some evental ruptures are much calmer and peaceful than one would think. A bird pooping on one’s windshield, for instance, can be an event for the truth of a religious conversion—who knows?

Having discussed the seeming disadvantages against FT₃, I will now turn to another objection. It can be argued, for instance, that BTM₂ does not dismiss morally despicable acts in a subject’s pursuit of truths. As admitted earlier, a degrading sacrifice is not despicable *per se* and would have nothing to do with meaningfulness. This seems to allow that other morally despicable acts are permissible as long as they are done in the service of fidelity. This can easily be referred back to Badiou’s notion of genericity and his notion of evil.

Badiou claims that a procedure is generic if at least one of its elements eludes the situation’s recognition.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Badiou calls evil the attempt to

⁷⁰ Metz (2013) p. 235.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Cf. the discussion of *thaumadzein* of Hannah Arendt (1990).

⁷³ Badiou (2012a) p. 42.

⁷⁴ Badiou (2005) p. 541.

name what is supposedly unnameable.⁷⁵ To put it in more concrete terms, evil can happen in three ways: as *terror*, as *betrayal*, or as *disaster*.⁷⁶ Terror happens when the event that began the process of fidelity is not real. His example here are the Nazis. The German situation gave birth to the unprecedented situation of Nazism to which a lot of German subjects became faithful to. If Badiouan truth proceeds this way, then we have the counterintuitive conclusion that unrepentant Nazis or even Hitler could have lived meaningful lives.⁷⁷ However, Badiou dismisses this “truth” of the Nazis as a mere *simulacrum* because the event to which subjects were faithful to was the illusory event of racial superiority and the “Jewish problem” propagated by Hitler in his *Mein Kampf*. It must be remembered that events are never a subject’s own doing. Although subjects *decide* an event, the event itself is not a subjective *creation*. Hence, the “Jewish problem” and Arian supremacy were not genuine events. The “truth” that followed them, therefore, is not real; it was a mere *simulacrum* of truth but not truth as such.

Secondly, evil can come as a betrayal when the subject stops being faithful to the truth it was once faithful to. It is a betrayal because there can never be any possibility of going back since the fidelity has already been severed. After the betrayal, the truth would no longer make sense to the individual. Like a lover who broke off a relationship, she would no longer think of going back unless she was never sure of the break up. Lastly, evil may come as a disaster when truth is identified with total power. Evil begins when the truth begins to demand order when there is no order, i.e. to name what is supposedly unnamable. This is characteristic, for instance, of Christian dogma demanding that definite lines be drawn on human sexuality: that everyone is either male or female, and nothing in between. But the event escapes the orderliness of the situation and it is only when a subject remains faithful to it that it begins to make sense.

With this threefold manifestation of evil, one can see that no evil act can be justified for the sake of fidelity to truths. When evil happens, it can only be because what was used to justify it was never the truth in the first place. It should be clear, therefore, that evil and truth are opposites and never composites.

⁷⁵ Badiou (2008) p. 126, see also Badiou (2012a).

⁷⁶ Badiou (2012a) p. 71.

⁷⁷ While Metz (2013) does not dismiss this outright, I do think that this is a putative intuition. This could be the subject matter of further debates on the matter.

5. Conclusion

This paper was able to formulate BTM₂ and critically evaluate it. Coming from the lack of metaphysical consciousness of the field, and the theory's potential to inform the current literature on its current problems, there is a need to derive such a theory. As discussed in the second section, the Badiouan theory can be summarized as the claim that *being true is a sufficient condition for a life to be meaningful*. Truth, as the qualifier for life, should be understood here as *generic*, i.e. a truth that escapes the situation's determination.

In the third section, I discussed the advantages of BTM₂ against the most widely accepted theory today, FT₃. Aside from current counterarguments against FT₃, I allege that there is an inherent vagueness in the notion of fundamentality and that the requirement of a substantial contouring is also vague. This vagueness, in turn, made Metz admit that FT₃ is sometimes metaphysical and sometimes epistemological, illustrating the need for the metaphysical grounding of our existentialist concepts. I have shown that BTM₂ evades these problems by positing truths as fundamental and positing fidelity as substantial.

In the fourth section, I have shown three seeming counterarguments to the proposed theory. First, unlike FT₃, BTM₂ seems to endorse the possibility of degrading sacrifice being compatible with meaningfulness. Drawing from the degrading fate of Jesus, I showed that a degrading sacrifice per se does not warrant lack of meaning. Much like Jesus', a degrading sacrifice could even enhance rather than reduce meaning in life. Moreover, I have argued that seizing a subject's fidelity to a truth is the more degrading act rather than actually continuing in the path of fidelity. Secondly, the theory seems to allow so-called unredeemed anti-matter. This objection, however, does not hold as the fidelity required for meaningfulness is capable enough to redeem whatever anti-matter is left to be redeemed. Lastly, following the question on degrading sacrifice, the theory seems to allow even the most despicable acts so long as they are at the service of truths. I argued, however, that evil and genericity are opposites and therefore the former can never be employed at the service of the latter.

Given the weaknesses of the FT₃ outlined herein, this paper has therefore shown that BTM₂ is a formidable theory to be reckoned with in contemporary analytic existentialism.

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