

The Meaning of Life

What We Mean by ‘Meaning’

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Abstract

There are two types of arguments found in the literature on existential meaning: (1) debates over existential meaning as a concept; and (2) debates over conceptions of existential meaning. Concepts are what make a question possible – i.e. they are the more-formal definitions assumed by a question. Conceptions, on the other hand, are like answers to the question. This paper will focus on the first type of argument about the formal concept of meaning. I claim that existential meaning is a valuable connection between a life and something valuable. I draw this concept mainly from the work of Robert Nozick, who claims meaning arises as a person *seeks* to connect to *external* values. However, due to objections considered in this paper, I contend that ‘meaning’ denotes valuable connections to value(s), period. At the end of this paper, I defend this concept against three objections.

1. Introduction

I am not concerned in this paper with answers to the question of life’s meaning, for I think the more fundamental issue is what we mean by the concept that makes the question possible. I echo the suspicion of G.E. Moore, who famously claims in the preface to his *Principia Ethica*: “It appears to me that in ... philosophical studies, the difficulties and disagreements ... are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely *what* question it is which you desire to answer.”¹ In particular, the task of this paper is to spell out the concept of meaning as it relates to the question: “what is the meaning of life?” To avoid any confusion, I will henceforth follow the convention of calling this type of meaning ‘existential meaning.’²

So far, I have been implicitly assuming the concept/conception distinction employed by John Rawls in his discussion of conceptions of justice in *A Theory*

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¹ Moore (1993), p. xvii.

² To be clear, the concept of existential meaning is broader than human life. We may wish to ask, for instance, about the meaning of the existence of the universe, or about the meaning of the existence of a particular phenomenon (like a black cat crossing our path). But I will be using the term ‘existential meaning’ as a shorthand for the meaning of (a) human life.

of Justice.³ For Rawls, a conception of justice is an *interpretation* of the role of principles of justice in assigning rights and duties.⁴ Generalizing, it would seem that, for Rawls, conceptions are interpretations of concepts. What, then, is a concept? Rawls elsewhere explains the distinction (as it pertains to ‘justice’) in the following manner: “it seems natural to think of the concept of justice as distinct from the various conceptions of justice and as being specified by the role which these different sets of principles, these different conceptions, have in common.”⁵ In other words, the concept of justice is specified (and implied) by the shared role of differing sets of principles in differing conceptions of justice. A bit later, he explains it somewhat differently, claiming the abstract concept of justice is a “proper balance” between competing principles of justice posited by (and composing) competing conceptions of justice.⁶ Putting Rawls’ two descriptions of a concept together, then, it would seem that a concept is a balance between or common denominator shared by differing conceptions.

Analogously, we could think of the concept of existential meaning as that idea shared by the various conceptions of meaning that people hold. Conceptions of meaning, on the other hand, would be interpretations of the concept of meaning. But if this is how we are to understand the distinction, it is far from satisfactory. These definitions are circular – to understand a concept, we must know what its conceptions are, and vice-versa. Thus, more specificity about what the distinction amounts to when applied to existential meaning will be helpful here.⁷

Thaddeus Metz applies the concept/conception distinction to existential meaning in his book, *Meaning in Life*. He explains that there are two types of arguments found in the literature on existential meaning: (1) debates over existential meaning as a concept; and (2) debates over different conceptions of existential meaning.⁸ According to Metz, concepts are what make a question possible – that is, they are what questions assume. It is helpful to think of the concept as being something like an abstract, formal definition that lacks substance. So, in discussing existential meaning as a concept, philosophers are primarily

³ Rawls is not the first to make this distinction. As far as I can find, the distinction between concept and conception is first made by W. B. Gallie in his paper, "Essentially Contested Concepts" (1955).

⁴ Rawls (1971), p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ I do not mean to imply that Rawls has no more to say on this distinction – he does. I introduce Rawls because he is popularly cited with reference to this distinction, and his construal of a concept as that idea shared in common by its various interpretations is helpful.

⁸ Metz (2013), p. 18-19.

concerned with asking what we mean by ‘meaning.’ Conceptions, on the other hand, are answers to questions. Offering a conception gives the formal concept substance. Indeed, another possible way to characterize the concept/conception distinction is to denote (1) as a debate about form and (2) as a debate about substance.

With that said, the distinction between concepts and conceptions should not be pushed too far, if for no other reason than philosophers disagree about what counts as an analysis of what. Rather than viewing the concept/conception distinction as one which is unambiguous and clear, it will be helpful to view the distinction as demarcating different areas along a continuum, where some discussions tend towards elucidating the concept/question, while others tend towards elucidating the conception/answer. Still, as alluded to by Rawls, looking at differing conceptions and real-world examples can help us get clear on what concept those conceptions/examples share in common. This paper will focus primarily on the former end of the concept/conception continuum. We can think of this idea as the one shared by all answers (conceptions) to the question.

An analysis of the concept of existential meaning should say something about the method that will be used in the analysis. I do not have space here to defend my method, but I do want to make it explicit. In this paper, I will mainly be searching for necessary and sufficient conditions for our concept of existential meaning. To do so, I will consider specific examples of existential meaning and consider whether or not a concept does or does not properly account for those examples. But we may have left the preceding paragraph still wondering about how to know what counts as a proper example of existential meaning. For instance, people may disagree about whether a certain life, L_0 , has meaning. My basic assumption is that if certain examples can be argued to be valid illustrations of a life with meaning, then our concept of meaning should allow for those examples to be included under its umbrella.

The idea is this: if Philosopher X gives us a purported case of meaning and can explain what the supposed meaning of that life is, then we have reason to include the case in our analysis. The reason must be based on *form*, since, as posited, we may disagree about its substance. Concretely, what I am proposing is that if Philosopher X can give us an intelligible sentence with the following form, then the example in question deserves to be *considered* in our analysis: “ L ’s life means M .” The assumption here is that if L means something, then L has meaning, M . Thus, it answers to the concept, even if in a very bad way. The only – and

important – restriction would be that *M* must be an intelligible proposition vis-à-vis *L*. So, if Philosopher X says that *L*'s life means that rocks are hard, we would probably have no reason to consider it, since our understanding of *L* undoubtedly has nothing to do with rocks being hard.

My central claim in this paper is that there is a unified concept of existential meaning assumed in the question: “what is the meaning of life?” In order to argue for this concept and flesh out some of its implications, this paper will proceed in two parts. In section two, I examine Robert Nozick’s concept of meaning, along with several objections and clarifications. In section three, I present and defend my own proposal, which is a modified version of Nozick’s. At the conclusion of that section, I consider three objections and argue that they are not a significant problem for my thesis.

2. The Value-Transcendence Concept

Robert Nozick’s formal concept of meaning relies upon the notion that meaning is about how a life *connects* with value(s) external to it. For Nozick, this connection to external values brings with it a transcendence of limitations. I will give a more precise exposition of his concept in just a moment. After I have refined the concept later in this section, I call it the “value-transcendence concept”. After considering several objections, I argue that it is unsatisfactory. However, in section three, I offer a concept that is built on the backbone of Nozick’s claim that meaning is about connection to value.

Nozick makes several comments about the concept of existential meaning in his *Philosophical Explanations*. For instance, Nozick says the problem of existential meaning is “*created* by limits, by being just this, by being merely this To see something’s limits, to see it as that limited particular thing or enterprise, is to question its meaning.”⁹ Elsewhere, Nozick says: “Meaning involves transcending limits so as to connect with something valuable; meaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value . . . a connection with an external value.”¹⁰ Nozick specifies that the connection may be one of ‘tracking’ values or ‘fitting’ external purposes.¹¹ Moreover, we see the value must be external. Importantly, he also clarifies elsewhere that the value he is concerned with is

⁹ Nozick (1981), p. 595 & 597, emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 594-5.

intrinsic.¹²

Before moving on, it will be helpful to look at Christine Korsgaard's essay, "Two Distinctions in Goodness", in order to flesh out some important differences in types of value.¹³ In that essay, she makes clear that there are at least four different types of value: intrinsic, extrinsic, final, and instrumental.¹⁴

Let us get clear on these values. I offer the following not as the definitive analysis of value (for I have not analyzed them at all). Indeed, further analysis itself warrants (and has received) book-length treatment. Rather, these will be functional definitions for the purposes of our discussion; these definitions should accord with standard philosophical usage of the terms and make sense of our discussion.¹⁵ For our purposes, an object of analysis has *intrinsic value* if and only if that object carries value in itself, regardless of anything outside of it. I will not specify in-virtue-of-what the object has that value, nor how it comes to have that value, since no such specification will be necessary for this project. I posit that 'knowledge' of this value would seem to be based on one's pre-analytic commitments, and not on an appeal to experience. On the other hand, an object of analysis has *extrinsic value* if and only if that object derives its value from some other source. Here, it would seem, there are at least two options: the value can either be projected onto the object,¹⁶ or be derived from some other object with intrinsic value, final value, or instrumental value.

An object of analysis has *final value* if and only if that object is valuable *for its own sake*. For the purposes of our discussion, I posit that this value is based on experience. I draw this idea from J. S. Mill. When considering the nature of final value, Mill draws a comparison between it and visible/audible objects. He says the best evidence that something is visible/audible is whether you can see/hear it. By analogy: "[T]he sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable is that people do actually desire it."¹⁷ Though Mill is talking about the status of happiness as desirable, the same argument could be made for whether something is valuable. The argument is that something is valuable – value-able – if someone values it. Indeed, that very valuation shows it is able to be valued. And for Mill: "Questions about ends are, in other words, questions about what things

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 611.

¹³ Korsgaard (1983).

¹⁴ Though I do not follow her definitions here, she gets the credit for distinguishing the four types.

¹⁵ I do not claim that these definitions get at the 'essence' of these concepts.

¹⁶ This would seem to be true for Nietzsche (1996).

¹⁷ Mill (2001), p. 35.

are desirable.”¹⁸ So I follow Mill in claiming that questions of final value are questions of what things people value as ends. On the other hand, an object of analysis has *instrumental value* if and only if that object is able to be valued as a means to a final value and/or an intrinsic value. Notice that some things can have both final value and instrumental value, as Aristotle makes clear in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Moreover, something can also have final and intrinsic value. Most people conceive of happiness in this way.

An example might be instructive here. Consider the activity of playing cards. Some people cannot stand it. This is evidence that playing cards does not carry value ‘in itself’, and is thus not intrinsically-valuable.¹⁹ But if you ask those who do enjoy card-playing why they like it, they may just tell you: “I don’t know, I just do!” This response indicates that card-playing is valued by many *for its own sake*. We’ve called this ‘final value.’ In order for something to have value as a means, it simply needs to bring about some state of affairs with a final value or intrinsic value (or both). We’ve called this type of value ‘instrumental value.’ For instance, some people value card-playing simply as a means to gamble for money. Notice that in these latter two cases, the value is projected onto the activity, and is thus extrinsic.

Nozick’s account relies upon intrinsic-value, period. However, that makes it susceptible to at least one objection: Hitler’s life.²⁰ By Nozick’s standards, lives such as Hitler’s (presumably) do not have meaning because they do not connect with intrinsic, external values. Indeed, Hitler’s life would seem to lack meaning precisely because it connected to *disvalue*. But while Hitler’s life may not, in fact, have meaning, we don’t want to rule out by definition the possibility that it may. But if Hitler’s life is not intrinsically valuable, what meaning could it have?

First, his life might be seen *by Hitler* as valuable for its own sake. Thus, it might have final value. Second, it might be seen as extrinsically-valuable, perhaps because it brought about intrinsically-valuable states of affairs, such as German citizens helping Jewish families to escape concentration camps. Third, it might be seen as instrumentally-valuable, perhaps because it teaches us a valuable historical lesson about the dangers of fascism and nationalism. In all these ways, it might still have value and thus be a candidate, at least in theory, for some type

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ I am not trying to press this example too far by making the strong claim that playing cards is most definitely not intrinsically-valuable. It is simply a plausible illustration of this point.

²⁰ Metz (2013) raises the example of Hitler in a different context, but it applies to this discussion as well.

of existential meaning. Thus, I will depart from Nozick's account on this point and specify that the value we are concerned with may be any of the four (intrinsic, extrinsic, instrumental, final) so far discussed.

In addition to connecting to external values, Nozick claims "attempts to find meaning in life *seek* to transcend the limits of an individual life."²¹ Presumably, he means that one must recognize one's own limitations and intentionally try to overcome them.²² Thus, there is an intentional aspect to the connection. So, let us formalize Nozick's concept like this:

Value-Transcendence Concept (VTC): (a) life, *L*, has meaning if and only if
L seeks to transcend limitations by
connecting with external value.

The question of existential meaning, then, is a question of connecting with external value. Answers to the question should account for *which* values beyond ourselves we should seek, and how we might connect with them. But how should we understand 'external value'?

When analyzing Nozick, Thaddeus Metz claims Nozick's concept is lacking because it doesn't permit conceptions of meaning that allow desire-satisfaction or pleasure-seeking to be meaningful (because those states are realized internally). For instance, Richard Taylor's conception of meaning, which he extracts from the myth of Sisyphus, allows pursuit of animal-desires, such as itch-scratching, to have meaning.²³ If we are right to interpret such desires as 'internal', then the *VTC* excludes those as examples of meaning. But presumably, animals should be allowed the possibility of having meaning in their lives (or so Metz thinks). Because Metz thinks Taylor's account deserves to be considered as a conception of existential meaning based on its popularity over the last 40 years, he rejects the concept of value-transcendence for existential meaning.²⁴ But, as I will argue in the following paragraphs, such rejection is unnecessary.

Metz's interpretation of the *VTC* can be easily avoided by staying true to Nozick's formulation of the concept, which simply talks about a life connecting with values 'outside' of it. There is a clear sense in which objects of desire and/or

²¹ Nozick (1981), p. 594 (emphasis added).

²² Credit to David McNaughton for bringing this point to my attention.

²³ See Taylor (2000).

²⁴ Metz (2013), p. 29.

pleasure, when not yet experienced, are ‘outside’ of me, even though it is within my nature to experience them. For instance, because we are often limited by circumstances and hardships from attaining pleasure, the future attainment of pleasure could properly be considered ‘external’ to my present state. Thus, attaining it would be a transcendence of limitation. Moreover, this interpretation allows for Taylor’s account to be included, as there is no worry about whether enjoyment-seeking preemptively excludes animals from the possibility of living a life with meaning. On this point, I am joined by Mirela Oliva, who agrees that Metz’ interpretation of Nozick is too narrow.²⁵

So let us define the internal/external distinction in this way: A value is *external* to a life if and only if that value is not being evidenced in that life right now, nor is it immediately possible (given the appropriate circumstances) for it to be so evidenced. A value is *internal* to a life if and only if that value is being evidenced in that life right now, or if it is immediately possible (given the appropriate circumstances) for it to be so evidenced. The idea here is that external values will require a person to do some work to internalize those values. Internal values require no such work, and can be manifested when circumstances require them. For instance, if Jane has internalized the value of courage, then when put in a situation requiring courage, she would be able to manifest that value. If Jane has not internalized courage, then when put in a situation requiring courage, she would not be able to manifest that value.

But supposing I do connect with external values by transcending my current limitations and incorporating them into my life – does the new *value-of-my-life-in-itself*, now that the value has been internalized, give my life meaning? For Nozick and the *VTC*, the answer is ‘no.’ The reason is that, once it is incorporated, I am no longer *seeking* it. Indeed, it is no longer external. There is a tradeoff, on the *VTC*, between meaning and value. Once one has made the connection to value and successfully transcended current limitations, the meaning of that particular act of transcendence ceases, for the value has now been attained. Later in his essay, Nozick says: “The *value* of a person’s life attaches to it *within its limits*, while the *meaning* of his life attaches to it as centered in the wider value context beyond its limits.”²⁶ Value is based on what one currently is. Meaning, it would seem, is

²⁵ Oliva (2019), p. 474. But unlike Oliva (2019), who seems to accept Nozick’s Value Transcendence Concept as I have formalized it above (p. 473), I believe we need to make some further distinctions and modifications to the VTC.

²⁶ Nozick (1981), p. 611.

based on a wider context – I will say much more on this later.

For now, an example – based on comments Nozick makes to explain the meaning/value tradeoff – will be useful here. Let’s quickly visit Taylor’s thoughts on the myth of Sisyphus. Recall that in the original myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus is punished by the gods with the task of rolling a stone up a hill, only to have it roll back down again, *ad infinitum*. Taylor asks us to consider a case where all of Sisyphus’ stone-rolling actually results in a temple. Before the temple is built, Sisyphus’ life has less value. As Sisyphus seeks to bring more value into the world – value that currently lies outside of Sisyphus’ own limits – his life is filled with meaning. But once he attains his desired end and brings that value into the world, the meaning ceases and Sisyphus is faced with “eternal boredom”. Truly, this experience is familiar to most people. While engaged in the *pursuit* of some desired end, we often find incredible meaning. But once we attain the end (and thereby increase the value of our life), the meaning vanishes. Indeed, we may get bored and think our lives are meaningless, even though we can see (and manifest) the internalized value in our life. Hence Nozick’s *Value-Transcendence Concept*. Meaning arises in a life while it *seeks* connection to external value.

But must a person, *L*, *seek* external values in order for *L*’s life to have meaning? At this point, we might wonder if Sisyphus’ life, construed as an object-lesson, might still have meaning. In the original myth, the gods punish Sisyphus with eternal stone-rolling. Presumably, one of the reasons they do so is because they want to use his life as a warning – a lesson to others who would dare to cross the gods. In that way, his life has instrumental value for all those who heed the warning. But the meaning of Sisyphus’ life as an object-lesson disappears vis-à-vis the *VTC* because Sisyphus does not *seek* that value himself. Yet, it would seem beneficial to our definition of existential meaning if it allows for the possibility that Sisyphus’ life has meaning as an object-lesson. If such meaning is possible, the *VTC* fails to supply necessary conditions of meaning.²⁷

We might also wonder if the value to which *L* connects *must* be external. If not, then the *VTC* would again fail to provide necessary conditions of meaning. To see why the *VTC* may fail in this way, we can consider the case of an unlimited being. Nozick analyzes just such a being in his chapter on existential meaning. There, he asks us to consider a being – he labels it with the Hebrew term “Ein Sof”

²⁷ Though he seems to accept Nozick’s *VTC*, David Benatar (2017, p. 18) agrees that lives can have ‘objective meaning’ for others, even if they are not felt to be meaningful for the person whose life is in question (p. 24-25).

– which ‘exists’²⁸ without limits. In many ways, *Ein Sof* is like God. Not only would such a being ‘exist’ coextensively with the universe (which still has limits), but this being would include the set of all possible worlds/universes – it excludes nothing.²⁹ Nozick explains that because existing requires a thing to exist as one thing and not another, *Ein Sof* would not really exist, since there is no thing that *Ein Sof* is not. Rather, *Ein Sof*, would transcend the distinction of existent/non-existent. Such a conception of the unlimited sounds much like the Dao or Brahman, which are also said to transcend that distinction.³⁰ Nozick believes that under the *VTC*, the *question* of how to obtain existential meaning could not arise for *Ein Sof*. That is because the question itself presupposes a world existing outside of *Ein Sof* – a world which, by definition, does not exist vis-à-vis *Ein Sof*. Thus, the *VTC* implies that this unlimited being *cannot* have existential meaning. It cannot have meaning because it has no limitations to transcend, i.e. no external values. But that would seem to be a problem for the concept, since we tend to think that, besides being unlimited in value, an unlimited being has existential meaning.

So, then, the *VTC* places two conditions on meaning that are problematic. In requiring *L* to *seek* external values, it rules out the meaning of *L* as an object-lesson. In requiring the sought values to be *external*, it rules out the possibility that a being like *Ein Sof* can have meaning.³¹ For now, I conclude that Nozick’s explicit endorsement of the *VTC*, as it stands, has deficiencies. But there may be a solution to these problems within Nozick’s own philosophy. In section 3, I examine some of Nozick’s other comments on meaning and offer a modified concept of meaning rooted within Nozick’s own thought.

3. The Connectivity Concept

We saw in the last section that the *Value-Transcendence Concept* failed because it could not account for the meaning of the lives of unlimited beings (*Ein Sof*), nor the meaning of Sisyphus’ life as an object-lesson. In this section, I

²⁸ The reason for the scare quotes will become evident in just a few sentences.

²⁹ Nozick (1981), p. 600.

³⁰ Ames & Hall (2003), p. 14.

³¹ As we have seen, other philosophers, notably Metz (2013), Oliva (2019), and Benatar (2017) have critically engaged Nozick’s account as well. However, they do not explicitly raise the objections to his account that I have raised in this section, nor do they explicitly modify his account in the way that I suggest we ought to in section 3.

present and defend my own monist proposal for the concept of existential meaning. First, I examine the more-formal concept hinted at in my discussion of Nozick at the end of the last section. I explain how this revised concept can accommodate the existential meaning of unlimited beings and how it makes room for the meaning of object-lessons. I also raise two further cases and show how it can accommodate those. However, I ultimately abandon Nozick's use of 'transcendence' as the operational term due to the idiosyncratic ways in which I would have to put the term to use. Instead, after unpacking other aspects of Nozick's account, I opt for what I call the *Connectivity Concept (CC)*.

The notion of existential meaning that we are exploring concerns connection to value. Let us look at the following passage from Nozick, which I quote at length because of its importance for our task:

The value of a person's life attaches to it within its limits, while the meaning of his life attaches to it as *centered in the wider value context beyond its limits*. This meaning will depend upon the *array* of external or *wider values* connected with it and upon *the nature of the connections*, their strength, intensity, closeness, the way his attachment unifies those values. The meaning of a life is its *place in a wider context of value*. We might imagine a life as having a view of value: clearly in view and more in the foreground are what the life is connected to most closely. *The meaning of a life, then, would be how the whole realm of value looks from there*, its perspective on the realm of value as a function of its interconnections with it. If intrinsic value is degree of organic unity, then the meaning of a person's life is the organic unity of the realm of values as centered on, as organized around, him; it is the value of the realm of value, when transformed so as to center on him. It is a measure of the degree of organic unity his life brings to the realm of value.³²

There is much in this quote to unpack. First, I note that this passage does not seem to be consistent with the *VTC*. This passage is inconsistent with the *VTC* because the *VTC* requires that the life in question *seek* connection to values. There is no hint of the notion of seeking in this passage. Rather, in this passage, the meaning of a life – denote it with *L* – is “how the whole realm of value looks from there”.

³² Nozick (1981), p. 611 (emphasis added).

The meaning is *L*'s "place in a wider context of value" that is "beyond [*L*'s] limits". Meaning depends on the "array ... of wider values" and how those values are "organized around [*L*]". However we are to interpret these comments, they clearly do not indicate that *L* must *seek* value in order to have meaning.

So what do these comments mean? Are they even consistent with one another? We have meaning as a "place", meaning as a perspective on the "whole realm of [intrinsic] value", and meaning as organization and connection to an "array ... of wider values". Before moving to an interpretation of these rather cryptic suggestions, let us put this passage back into context.

In this passage, Nozick tries to explain how it is a life might lose meaning when it finally obtains the valued end it seeks. This is the value vs. meaning tradeoff we saw earlier. Recall, we considered the example of Taylor's temple-building Sisyphus, who is eternally bored upon completion of his project. If that is all the value left for Sisyphus – if he has exhausted all connections with value – then Nozick means to say that his life is meaningless. That's because, as the lengthy passage makes clear, Nozick thinks meaning requires there to be a broader realm of value outside of one's life. Clearly, the existence of those values alone is not sufficient to give meaning to *L*. Rather, *L* must connect to them in some way in order for *L* to find meaning. What the quoted passage, on its own, does not make clear – but which the *VTC* *does* make clear – is that for Nozick, meaning is possible only if one is able to make connections to that wider context of value. Thus, Nozick is saying that connection-to-*external*-values is necessary for meaning.

It is unclear when interpreting Nozick if his final understanding of the concept accords more with the *VTC* (where the values are sought by *L*), or whether he finally opts for the view of meaning suggested in the passage above (where connection to a wider context of value alone seems to be the necessary and sufficient condition for meaning). It seems that, where he is clearest, his concept of meaning is indeed the *VTC*. But I think the direction he heads in the above passage, along with refinements that I make in a moment, would be the better way for him to go. Next, I clarify and refine Nozick's concept vis-à-vis the objections I have raised so far.

Let us first revisit the example of Sisyphus. The key ingredient in salvaging meaning from the original story of Sisyphus is the notion that someone, somewhere, finds meaning in his story. In order for someone to find meaning, I

argued that his story must be instrumental in helping them to see³³ an intrinsic-and/or end-value. What is the nature of the connection, then, that bestows meaning on Sisyphus' life? It must be that the story of Sisyphus plants ideas³⁴ in people's minds about the relation of Sisyphus' life to some value. Most importantly, people learning about Sisyphus must judge that this connection is valuable.³⁵ And what is the nature of that judgment? They *value* the connection of Sisyphus' life to a valuable object-lesson. If they don't see the connection they've made between Sisyphus' life and value as valuable, it would seem that they will not see the meaning. That is, if they don't value the connection itself, they may simply yawn and ask: "Who cares? So his life connects to value – it's not a value or connection that I care about". Such an attitude toward Sisyphus' life would seem to indicate that they find it meaningless. Thus, the connection itself must be valuable. Let's consider another example to see why.

Throughout this paper, I have raised several examples of meaning that my readers may have found dubitable. The example of itch-scratching as having meaning is one such example. But for those who may have balked at the possibility that such a life can have meaning, we now have a reason why: while those readers might acknowledge that itch-scratching has a final value for the person engaging in that action, those same readers fail to value the connection themselves. Indeed, even if we posit that itch-scratching is intrinsically-valuable, it will fail to convince most readers that the activity bestows meaning. They will not value the connection between the itch-scratcher and the value of itch-scratching. Most importantly, they will not see a meaning that answers their question about the meaning of life. Yet, while the reader may not value the connection, the person engaging in that connection does. Therefore, since, as I am claiming, meaning is a valuable connection to value, the itch-scratcher's life will have meaning for the itch-scratcher, but not for those observing it. As Nozick says, "the meaning of a person's life is the organic unity of the realm of values as centered on, as organized around, him; it is the value of the realm of value, when transformed so as to center on him."³⁶ As long as someone finds the connection between *L* and value as valuable, it increases the value of the realm of value when centered on *L*. Again, the important point is that the connection itself must be

³³ This word is rather vague at this point. I will give a stronger interpretation in a few paragraphs.

³⁴ Here, too, we must be more specific about what 'plants ideas' amounts to.

³⁵ *This* is the important takeaway point about the connection.

³⁶ Nozick (1981), p. 611.

valuable.

Now let us consider two more examples, which I label *Neo* and *Barbie*.³⁷ Consider the life of Neo. Suppose Neo is in a computer simulation, and is none the wiser about it. Further, suppose that everyone who is a part of Neo's life are real people who are also in the simulation, and who love Neo in just the same way they would love him and interact with him if they were not in a simulation. Moreover, suppose that Neo's life would be experienced by everyone in exactly the same way if Neo lived in the 'real' world. Finally, suppose that by some coincidence of quantum physics, matter and energy would be distributed in either world in exactly the same way. Which life has more meaning? Many would answer that his life in 'real' world has more meaning, since it is connected to what is 'real' in a way that his life in a 'simulation' world is not. That is, the connection itself has more value, and thus increases the "value of the realm of value" by one connection. And this increases the meaning of Neo's life when compared to the simulated world.

Now consider Barbie. Suppose Barbie lives in a world of 'fake' plastic objects, but does not know they are not real – nor does anyone else. Barbie's and everyone else's mental states would be the same in either world. Further suppose that the distribution of matter and energy would be the same if Barbie lived in the 'real' world. Most would agree that Barbie's life would have more meaning if she lived in a world surrounded by 'real' objects. Again, that is because her connection to what is real is itself valuable, and increases the "value of the realm of value" in that world.

Why do we find more meaning in the 'real' world, rather than the simulated or plastic ones? In both examples, Neo and Barbie perceive objects with intrinsic-value ('realness' being intrinsically-valuable) when in the 'real' world, but they do not value their perceptions of value as such because they do not know about them. But the reader being told of the example *does* know about their perceptions of valuable objects compared to the simulated and plastic worlds. Indeed, if those examples carry any weight for getting the reader to believe in the added meaning of the 'real' world, it is because the *reader* values the connection that Neo and Barbie make to value. So, though Neo and Barbie do not value the connection as such (because they do not know about it), the reader does. In that way, the lives of Neo and Barbie form a valuable connection for the reader. So the reader, who

³⁷ Metz (2013) uses examples like these in a different context. Credit to him for their substance.

values a connection between a life and intrinsic-value (the ‘real world’), finds added meaning – i.e. a valuable connection to value – in these examples, even though Neo and Barbie do not. If the reader sees no added meaning in the lives of Neo and Barbie, my claim is that it is because the reader does not value the connection that these characters make to the added value of the ‘real’ world.

But what if we completely remove the perspective of the reader, and (to the best of our ability) stipulate that you, the reader, do not know about the examples. In other words, imagine that no one, nowhere, at no time – the reader included – knows about Neo’s and Barbie’s perceptions of value in the ‘real’ world. Are their acts-of-perception, these connections, valuable if *no one* values them?

Obviously, the act-of-perceiving-the-real-world now has no added instrumental value – it brings no intrinsic or final value into the world, since the intrinsic value of ‘real’ objects in their world (and ours!) would be the same regardless of that act, and the act-of-perception changes no one’s mental states by causing them to value that act. The remaining options for the act itself to be considered valuable would be as a final value, an extrinsic value, or as an intrinsic value.

Since, earlier, I defined final value based on a person’s actual judgments, and since, as stipulated, no one is around to form judgments about this connection, the act cannot have final value. Thus, the other possibilities would be for it to have intrinsic value or extrinsic value.

It’s not at all clear that the act-of-perception qualifies as valuable under the heading of intrinsic value, since I have not adequately explained what makes an object of value carry value-in-itself. I imagine my readers will share different intuitions about how to judge the intrinsic value of this connection. But in any case, we must remember the act-of-perception cannot derive any value from the *reader’s* judgment. So, it seems that in order for us to figure out whether or not the act-of-perception has intrinsic value, we need a theory of intrinsic value. Are we, then, at a standstill in analyzing the concept of meaning? My contention is that we are not, for two reasons.

The first reason is that it may have extrinsic value. It would seem that the perception-of-value has extrinsic value in virtue of connecting with intrinsic value (reality). That is, the connection derives value, at least in part, from the intrinsic value that is perceived. Because the act-of-perception is dependent on something with intrinsic value, it does not seem implausible to suggest that it has at least some extrinsic value for that very reason. In other words, it is the intrinsically-

valuable object of the act-of-perception which *makes* the connection extrinsically-valuable. Even still, not all readers may share that intuition. So, let us consider a second reason for thinking that we are not at a standstill.

The reason for thinking we can proceed with our analysis is based on the assumptions of our method. It seems that if there is value in the posited connection, then there *could* be meaning in it (our methodological pre-commitments give us reason to accept this marginal case as a case of meaning). Moreover, it would certainly seem that if there is any meaning derived from the act-of-perception, it must be because there is value in it (as I have been arguing). Thus, whatever the nature of the value of the act-of-perception, it will determine whether or not there is meaning in that connection. In other words, the claim, while perhaps at first dubious, is this: their perceptions-of-value are valuable if and only if they have meaning. But meaning *for* whom?

In order to defend my dubious biconditional claim and answer this question, I must emphasize the distinction between the meaning of the *question* of existential meaning, and the meaning of the *concept* of existential meaning – a distinction that I have not explicitly made clear. But I believe this distinction may help us see where our doubts about the biconditional claim are coming from. For, depending on which thing we are seeking to understand, the concluding question of the last paragraph seems to warrant two different responses, depending on which we are concerned with. These different responses are most likely the source of our doubts about the biconditional. I contend that in defining the *concept*, an answer makes sense to the concluding question of the last paragraph – there is meaning for the lives of Neo and Barbie (because their connections to value have value) or there is no meaning at all (because their connections to value have no value). Taking the reverse of each of these claims, if we reject the idea that the perception-of-value bestows meaning, then we should also reject the idea that the perception-of-value itself has value.

On this point, I believe those who deny the existence of intrinsic-value (like Nietzsche) would agree. They would agree that the ‘real’ world has no added intrinsic value, since no such value exists anywhere. Thus, the connection can have neither intrinsic nor extrinsic value. But, importantly, Nietzsche would (and should) agree that it also, then, has no meaning.

However, when it comes to the *question* of existential meaning (which the *concept* of existential meaning makes possible), the second response to the concluding question of three paragraphs ago, viz. “meaning for whom?”, must be

one of puzzlement. Indeed, the question might even seem absurd. In asking the question, the person, *Q*, asking the question expects an answer which will explain the value of the connection. That is, *Q* wants to *value the connection* as well. So an explanation of the value of the connection will only be successful if *Q* is persuaded to value the connection. If *Q* is persuaded, the connection will also have meaning for *Q*. Since, as stipulated, there is no one asking the question, and since (as with any question about anything) there is a *question* of existential meaning if and only if there is a *Q*, there can be no answer, either. The person, *Q*, asking the question about a life, *L*'s, meaning – be it Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, or any other existentially-anguished individual – wants to find a way that *L* connects to value. But *Q* will only be satisfied so long as the connection offered to *Q* is valued by *Q*. And it will only be valued by *Q* if the connection is to a value that *Q* recognizes.

So, let us clarify a couple of points. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the *concept* of existential meaning? The connection of *L* to value is itself valuable. And what is the nature of the connection? *L* makes a difference to the total value of the world by raising its total value by one valuable connection. What is the meaning of the *question* of existential meaning? The question seeks a connection to value for *L* – a connection that is valued by *Q*.

Thus, I am proposing that we get rid of the *VTC*'s condition that *L* seek a connection to value and replace it with the notion that *L* form a valuable connection to value. Let us turn now to the second condition the *VTC* places on meaning: must the object of the connection be an *external* value?

Recall that in the case of *Ein Sof*, there are no values external to *Ein Sof*. Thus, *Ein Sof*'s life cannot have meaning, which is a counterintuitive result. It can be avoided quite simply. We can avoid the *Ein Sof* objection if we generalize the *VTC* and stipulate that meaning is about valuable connections to value – either internal or external value. Suppose lives within *Ein Sof* transcend their particular limitations through connection to values within *Ein Sof*. Such connections would lend their lives meaning. And presumably, if a part of *Ein Sof* has meaning, then *Ein Sof* has meaning as well. So let us further stipulate that *L*'s valuable connection may be made to an internal or an external value.

We are now in a place to formalize our concept of existential meaning:

Connectivity Concept (CC): (a) life, *L*, has meaning if and only if
L forms a valuable connection to some value.

Notice, ‘valuable connection’ is a normative requirement. By it, we mean that the connection must be valuable (in any of the four senses). Second, the object of the connection carries a normative requirement as well. The thing(s) to which *L* is connected must be valuable (in any of the four senses – they need not be intrinsically-valuable).

One might object to this concept by saying that it is too broad, precisely because it allows for an object-lesson to have existential meaning. The idea here would be that, in asking the question of meaning for myself, I am not interested in answers that would make my life into an object-lesson for someone else. That is because I don’t value that type of connection for my life. As the *Q* asking the question, that’s not what I meant by the question. But that is to confuse *my question* of existential meaning with the *concept*. Even if my-life-as-an-object-lesson is not the meaning I seek for myself, I can still admit that my-life-as-an-object-lesson might have meaning for others when they are weighing the meaning of my life *for them*.

Thus, I do not think it is a mistake to apply the concept of meaning to lives that serve as object-lessons. Lives-as-object-lessons still have existential meaning; the value of the connection, however, is different. It has instrumental value for others, if not intrinsic or final value for the *L* being considered. Perhaps offering an object-lesson answer to the existentially-anguished person would be to offer a *bad* answer considering *the motivation* for that person’s question. But it would not be a theoretically-confused answer that failed to understand the *concept* in question.

Secondly, one might object that the *CC* is too broad because it allows lives in an experience machine (similar to that of Neo’s) to have meaning. Many philosophers would claim that lives lived in experience machines are meaningless. Thus, they would argue that if the *CC* allows such lives to have meaning, then that is a problem for the *CC*.

In reply, let me say, first, that if we were to pump the intuition that lives lived in an experience machine are meaningless, presumably we would think so precisely because lives lived in experience machines lack value. If it is indeed the case that these lives lack value – and indeed, that there is no value to be had in an experience machine – then there would be no values to which those lives could form valuable connections. Thus, the *CC* could render us the verdict that lives in an experience machine are indeed meaningless (by definition) because they do not form valuable connections to value.

Second, even if we allow for the possibility that there are values to be found in an experience machine, then we still do not need to worry about many philosophers' intuitions that such lives are, in fact, meaningless. To see why, we need only consider the distinction between the concept of meaning and its many conceptions. If lives in an experience machine connect in valuable ways to the values that are possible in an experience machine, then we would not be confused in claiming that they are, by definition, *candidates* for meaning. That is, we would not be conceptually confused if we rendered the verdict that they *might* have meaning (by definition). But remember, we are *only* claiming that the *concept* of meaning is applicable to such lives. Still, we could exclude such lives from our *conceptions* of meaning. For instance, if we offer a conception of meaning that requires a life, *L*, to promote intrinsic value, and if we think there are no intrinsic values in experience machines (though we might concede that there are instrumental and final values), then we would still be in a position to deny that *L* has meaning, even though it is not ruled out by our definition of the concept.

Lastly, one might object that the *CC* cannot distinguish between the value of animal pleasure (or subjective well-being) and meaning in life. In other words, since most philosophers agree that there's a conceptual difference between the two, and because the *CC* would allow for a life of animal pleasure to count as meaningful, this is a problem for the *CC*. This is a bullet I am willing to bite. I accept the implication that my account cannot distinguish between some theories of subjective well-being (both desire-satisfaction and pleasure-based theories) and the concept of existential meaning. I am willing to accept this implication because I believe it would be incredibly presumptuous to call someone conceptually-confused if they find a life of animal pleasure or itch-scratching to be meaningful. I might (correctly) argue that they are wrong about the meaning they are finding in life, but I wouldn't want to tell them that they don't even understand what meaning is. But on that note, I believe my analysis can and does allow for philosophers analyzing *conceptions* of meaning to make the distinction between subjective well-being and existential meaning, and to argue that the best *conception* of existential meaning does not reduce to a theory of subjective well-being. In fact, I am very much inclined to believe that very thing to be the case.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that the concept of existential meaning is the

Connectivity Concept. This concept is rooted in the work of Robert Nozick, with some important revisions given some examples that were examined.

There remains much work to be done. *CC* is so broad and formal that it risks allowing conceptions of meaning that may strike some readers as counterintuitive, such as the case of Sisyphus as object-lesson or the itch-scratcher. But this is not a failure of the concept. Many concepts, formally-defined (such as ‘justice’) allow conceptions that would strike many as inaccurate or erroneous. That is why it is incumbent upon philosophers to argue for their *conceptions* of existential meaning. But remember, this paper was not attempting to offer a conception of existential meaning that the reader would find persuasive. Rather, this paper was concerned to show that whenever philosophers conceptualize the existential meaning of a life, they are always conceptualizing some valuable connection between a life and something valuable.

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