

Meaning as Horizon

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Abstract

Many contemporary philosophical discussions of the meaning of human existence interpret ‘meaning’ primarily as ‘purpose’, ‘value’, ‘narrative’, and so on. However, these approaches threaten to obscure dimensions of the question. Inspired by thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, I suggest instead that existential meaning may be most essentially understood in terms of the background or surrounding context which serves as the immediate condition for the possibility of human existence's intelligibility as a whole. Here the ‘meaning’ is that primary distinction which draws the productive limit to human existence, analogously to how a literal horizon circumscribes one’s sensory field and orients one spatially. This approach clarifies the topography of the question itself and is plausibly more relevant to addressing the concerns of those who suffer ‘crises’ of meaning. I suggest that such persons are profoundly disoriented as to their ‘place in existence’ as an intelligibility-making being and seeking an orienting ‘horizon’.

1. Introduction

But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?¹

In the famous passage quoted above, Nietzsche’s character, ‘the madman’, speaks of the consequences of the ‘death of God’. Here Nietzsche implies that God once served a role for humanity analogous to that of a ‘horizon’. And with the loss of that horizon comes the risk of a profound disorientation.

Throughout his works, Nietzsche often implies that, absent such a point of orientation, the modern individual’s interpretation of themselves is now in many ways robbed of context and therefore a basis in anything resembling internally coherent sense. For example, Nietzsche observes that even as atheism was in

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¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Sect. 125.

many corners becoming fashionable in his time, the same atheists often blindly adhered to traditional moral norms that originally justified themselves primarily in the context of a relationship to God. And similar ‘blind spots’ are found with regard to common conceptions of the human ‘subject’, their ‘free will’, and other central questions of the human being’s self-knowledge.² As such, Nietzsche thought, the common modern ‘herd’ lives in an uncritical practical nihilism, their ‘purposes’ and very ‘identities’ shot through with contradictions and hypocrisy in a way that finds each human being at war with themselves and their lives fundamentally without a sense of direction.

In the past, so Nietzsche tells us, humanity had fixed their view upon God as their primary horizon, with the distinction between themselves and God – or, if you prefer, between the immanent and the transcendent – serving as a prerequisite for stepping into relation with the opposite term of that relation. They subsequently elaborated their interpretation of themselves and each element of their reality in terms of that relationship. While eventually this viewpoint’s internal paradoxes would rise to the surface and destabilize it, for some time at least, humanity had a relatively robust and unified sense of meaning in what was, for all intents and purposes, an ‘ultimate’ sense. It was no mere source of individual contentment. Rather, God was that in terms of which human nature was defined, its possibilities delimited, their place in being reckoned, and *by consequence* that in terms of which any talk of the human being’s purpose – what could possibly justify the birth, death, and suffering of any given human being (to say nothing, as yet, of their happiness) – could become intelligible. Nietzsche can be read to suggest that, while it can no longer manifest in precisely the same form (i.e., as God), something analogous to such a ‘horizon’ may have to be created anew if humanity is to overcome the ‘life-denying’ onset of nihilism.

Martin Heidegger too would imply that existential meaning (i.e., a meaning of human existence [qua human] taken as a whole, particularly to the extent that this is possible from a human perspective) is best thought of in terms of a view to a ‘horizon’.³ In his case, he proposes that death, properly understood, might serve this role. He designates death as the ‘utmost’ among Dasein’s (i.e., the individualized human existence’s) possibilities. That is, it is the possibility that stands behind all others, circumscribing them and delimiting one’s existential possibilities from those of other Dasein (analogously to how a literal spatial

² See, for instance, *Twilight of the Idols*, esp. Pgs. 19-33.

³ See, for just a few examples: SZ 201, 231, 264.

horizon circumscribes and delimits my field of vision). Hence it is only with a proper view to death that “one is liberated from one’s lostness in those possibilities [belonging to others] which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and...in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped [i.e., death]”.⁴

Heidegger also famously provides phenomenological accounts of several forms of experiences of meaninglessness, most notably that of *Angst*, which he describes in terms of the world becoming drained of significance and familiarity, appearing unintelligible, with only our very situatedness in being obtruding to us as a mystery.

The above accounts from Nietzsche and Heidegger typify a more general approach to the question of the meaning of human existence: Conceiving of ‘meaning’ in terms of ‘horizon’. In what follows, I will argue that this is the most potentially fruitful model for thinking about meaning in the existential sense.

‘The meaning of human existence’ is here conceived as ‘the condition for the possibility of the intelligibility of human existence as a whole (insofar as this ‘whole’ may be understood from the first-person perspective)’. And to see this condition as ‘horizon’ is to see it as a fundamental delimiting distinction on the basis of which further derivative distinctions are generated which form a network of significations making up one’s understanding of a significant ‘world’. We could say that, under this framework, the question of ‘life’s meaning’ asks how to circumscribe human existence, simultaneously defining and referencing the context in contradistinction with which that existence may be understood.

2. Illustrations and Explication

The visual metaphor of a literal spatial horizon will help outline the shape of the idea I have in mind. Consider how the horizon draws a limit to what is within one’s sensory field of vision. It is a productive limit, however, in the way it makes possible further relative spatial/directional distinctions. With reference to a horizon, one becomes capable of distinguishing up from down, left from right, near from far, and in turn the positions of things one can see relative to one another. It acts, hence, as a point or background context of orientation with regard to which

⁴ SZ 264.

one becomes capable of navigating their immediate visual environment. Likewise, when one lacks reference to such a horizon, for example in the case of a pilot flying an airplane through conditions of thick fog, the disorientation which results can become unsettling and dangerous.⁵

I propose that something like a ‘meaning of human existence’ should act analogously, as the background or defining limit against which we might interpret or conceive of ‘human existence’ and in turn the various elements of that existence, including the whole intelligible world. It should be a generative ur-distinction from which all other distinctions making up the fabric of a relatively complete interpretation of reality trace back their roots.

When I have existential meaning, I have a view, however implicitly, to a point of orientation with reference to which I may draw and perpetually redraw a distinction between the human and non-human – or, perhaps somewhat more precisely – between who/what I am and who/what is other than myself.⁶ That is,

⁵ I say ‘*with reference to* such a horizon’ because, strictly speaking, a direct view of the horizon is not always needed for one to make use of the orienting basis which that horizon affords. If one is able to keep a view to some derivative distinction(s) making up one’s total visual-spatial orientation, where those derivative distinctions themselves ultimately refer back to the primary distinction represented by the horizon, one may be able to retain their orientation. Indeed, for example, we do not necessarily become disoriented when indoors and a direct view to a horizon is unavailable, for we still have indirect visual means of distinguishing left from right (and so on) within that visual environment. (And, of course, we make use of other means than just sight to orient ourselves in space generally, such as our kinesthetic capacity to balance our bodies against gravity and so on; my metaphor of the visual horizon is meant to apply to our environmental orientation only to the extent that this orientation is visual. The environment as delimited by those other senses and capacities which aid orientation may have their own respective ‘horizons’.)

But we might think that this indirect means of orientation functions precisely because these distinctions (i.e., left and right, etc.) themselves refer back to their own conditions of possible intelligibility – including, ultimately, the limitation of our visual environment, the horizon – in a way that we may implicitly understand for the sake of navigating space. So, even the pilot flying through fog, were she to catch a glimpse of the ground or some landmark protruding from the fog, say, this might suffice for her to reorient herself, at least for that moment. Analogously, orientation when it comes to existential meaning may be a matter of degrees and types of access to sufficiently direct or indirect reference. Nevertheless, I suggest, securing an understanding of which relatively more basic distinction(s) ground the more derivative ones should help us keep a view to how the latter reference the former. In turn, this should make us that much less likely to become disoriented and make it that much easier to recover if we do. And this is why I emphasize the importance of the potentially most basic intelligible distinction, i.e., the ‘horizon’ circumscribing our meaningful existence as a whole.

⁶ For the sake of ease of expression, I have used the term ‘human’ or ‘human being’ here and elsewhere throughout this essay as a sort of placeholder term with no specific pre-conception of ‘human nature’ intended beyond ‘that being which is capable of distinguishing itself from what is other than itself, and in the process coming to recognize that it has done so’ (in the way that manifests via what we would typically think of as making possible one’s ‘first person point of view’). And it is indeed a ‘placeholder’ in that I do not in any way intend this to be taken as a definitive conception of the human being, but one meant to be as neutral as possible (relative to what is compatible with my conception of meaning as horizon) and to be substituted for a more precise formulation once the problem of existential meaning

I cognize a primary demarcation between my existential possibilities (i.e., my possible ways of being and their concomitant self-conceptions) and those which are not proper to me - first as the sort of being that I am and subsequently as this unique individual.

Likewise, when I have an ‘existential crisis’, an experience of profound meaninglessness, I am temporarily disoriented as to how to make my world and my ‘place in it’ coherently intelligible to myself. Some salient elements of my existence may seem to come into irreconcilable tension with one another, for example. And so it is no longer evident to me how I may come to ‘make myself at home’ in being.⁷

Approached from a slightly different angle: When we, however implicitly, ask the question of “What is a human being?” and come to the prior question of “By what method should we decide the answer?”, the answer to this latter question might come in the form of drawing the primary difference which demarcates the limit between ‘the human’ and ‘the non-human’ (namely, whichever particular distinction we might decide should serve such a role).⁸

Everything we do, say, think, and experience already presupposes, however implicitly, some conception or other of what it means to be human (and therefore the conditions of the possible intelligibility of that conception). By deconstructing and reconstructing the ways we are experiencing, understanding, and relating to our world already, we can reflect on how the intelligibility-making process works, structurally-speaking, and in turn gain insights into what may or may not be adequate to serve such a role as ‘the meaning of human existence’.

has been worked through. As Heidegger would point out, even the use of the term ‘being’ should not have its meaning taken for granted as though it had been transparently clarified in advance. Such terms stand to be clarified in the course of a sustained inquiry into existential meaning.

⁷ It should be kept in mind when interpreting my remarks explaining experiences of meaning or meaninglessness throughout this paper, that an experience of meaninglessness may take various forms, and I do not mean to imply that it is necessarily accompanied by any specific articulable conscious thoughts. In fact, as is to be expected of an experience of unintelligibility as such, by its nature it often resists direct articulation of its content.

⁸ Admittedly, this way of putting the point begs the question of “How should we decide which is the appropriate primary distinction to select as what will be our ‘meaning’?” A full outline of how this determination might be made in a non-viciously-circular and non-arbitrary way lies beyond the scope of this essay’s immediate project. However, as one might imagine, this selection is never made in a vacuum, but from a certain prior perspective, which already finds itself taking this or that ‘point of orientation’, albeit perhaps in a broader sense. Later on, I will say more about the sense of ‘meaning’ the average person already possesses in their everyday pre-philosophical lives and how it differs from ‘meaning’ in a purportedly more ‘ultimate’ sense as will be relevant to this point.

3. Advantages

This ‘horizon’ model of meaning provides a number of advantages when attempting to grapple with the question of existential meaning.

Firstly, this account has the resources to explain the seemingly peculiar status of the question of existential meaning itself; why it seems like a non-question to so many, or at least poorly motivated to the point that direct philosophical discourse about it may seem unnecessary. There is also the matter of why genuine ‘crises of meaning’ might seem to some as so exceptionally rare, if their existence is rightly to be acknowledged at all, that talk of them seems most properly reserved for jokes rather than something to be taken seriously.⁹ And yet the question presents itself as somehow the most important one a human being can ask (even if this is often brushed off as a mere pretension).

Indeed, if ‘meaning’ is to be understood in terms of ‘intelligibility’ (or what conditions its possibility), as I suggest, it might seem to be a non-issue. Each of us constantly attempts to make their world intelligible as a world, and for the most part we appear to succeed – at least to whatever extent is sufficient for having a ‘commonsensical’, everyday world which we are capable of adequately navigating. So apparently ‘meaning’ is possible. And while it may very well be

⁹ I have in mind here, to take one example, a viewpoint which denies the possibility of a sort of ‘existential crisis’ which is symptomatic of an essentially human need to make existence intelligible as a whole (i.e., a sort of which various existentialist philosophers – among whom I mean to include such thinkers as Nietzsche and Heidegger – have spoken). Someone subscribed to such a view might, for instance, attempt to explain such crises as either delusions or actually primarily symptoms of psychological disorders, in any case idiosyncratic to the individuals who profess to experience these crises.

For my part, I am sympathetic to the ‘essential need’ view mentioned above. Presuming that everything claimed as an experience of meaninglessness is a matter of mere individual idiosyncrasy is both dismissive to the concerns of those who testify to such experiences and threatens to distort (or rather, ignore) the nature of the phenomenon. To be clear, I do not think philosophers as such should be in the business of attempting to identify in a given individual case what is and is not a ‘genuine’ crisis experience per se. Rather, it is more fruitful to start from the assumption that beings like us necessarily and constantly attempt to make meaning in the existential sense, but that the process may be structurally complex and yield many possible results. From there we could explore and differentiate various varieties of experience which might be placed under this designation while diagnosing their equally varied causes as well as determining how these causes may interact with or otherwise relate to one another.

While I speak of more or less ‘profound’ experiences of meaninglessness at points in this paper, I do not mean to imply that, say, an experience of loss of purpose is less worthy of addressing than a loss of ‘horizon’, or that it should garner less sympathy or the like. Rather, I mean to make an observation about the structure of existential meaning. Someone lacking a ‘horizon’ will lack not only a sense of purpose, for example, but also the condition for its possibility – a fact which ought to inform our approach to the case.

worth investigating the specifics of how we make meaning, if most everyone has meaning in this sense already, what is the problem signified by the ‘meaninglessness’ of the ‘existential crisis’?

Yes, as intelligibility-making, world-possessing beings, we all have meaning ‘by default’, or as Heidegger would put it, ‘proximally and for the most part’ in our ‘everyday’ state of being.¹⁰ But as Heidegger would go on to argue, the ‘horizon’ in terms of which we do so is a relatively parochial one which sees us functioning on unclarified and generally incoherent conceptions of ourselves. While an individual can potentially get through their whole lives operating in this way, there is always some risk that this relatively fragile meaning-structure will at least temporarily collapse, leading to a crisis experience such as *Angst*. Depending on how successful the given person is at ignoring the issue to which *Angst* attests, such experiences may pass and be forgotten about, or they may more permanently unsettle a person’s outlook. Heidegger suggested a more appropriate horizon in terms of which the individual might subsequently seek to conceive of themselves, which – it seems – promises to bring a relatively more complete, stable, and internally coherent basis for making themselves and their world intelligible, resolving the ‘crisis’ in a more permanent and profound way. Of course, the benefit of properly addressing the matter in this way is not merely to ensure that one is unbothered by occasional anxieties but rather that they are able to seize their potential to become a fully-realized human existence via a heightened degree of self-knowledge.

Broadly following the outline of Heidegger’s approach, this ‘horizon’ account can hold that, while everyone in a sense starts out with some ‘meaning’, a horizon can be relatively narrow or relatively broad, and we each start out on the narrower end of this spectrum. Hence there is good reason why existential meaning can still become a question – that is, when we are made to confront how our relatively narrow horizons can be lost sight of or otherwise upended – and why ‘meaning’ (in the ‘ultimate’ sense) can become something that we might rightly take to require ‘seeking’ or ‘working out’. That is, we can come to see the benefits of a horizon that more properly draws the limit to all that we are and can be, better orientates us and in turn enriches our relationship with our world. Indeed, on the basis of this account, one could argue that we have a certain responsibility to pursue such a state, at least to the extent that we should be willing to assume

¹⁰ SZ 189-191.

responsibility for the fact that we are constantly drawing and redrawing some such ‘horizon’ for ourselves. And it turns out to not be without reason that the question of existential meaning could be seen as the most important question one can ask – even after all pretense has been dropped. If it is in terms of such a ‘horizon’ that we make sense of ourselves and in turn our world, then the question of existential meaning is the question of the very basis of any possible ‘worldview’ and the question presupposed by all other questions.

Secondly, this account offers an elegant framework for situating the various senses and dimensions of ‘meaning’ (such as ‘purpose’, ‘value’, and ‘significance’) in systematic relationships to one another – via their roles relative to the conditions of the possibility for any intelligibility at all and as a whole. And it accomplishes this while still venturing to provide a touchstone sense which can be associated directly with the single ‘most profound’ issue at the heart of a concern that is worthy of being called an ‘existential crisis’ of meaning.

Broadly-speaking, to have a purpose, guiding value, or even a significant world (i.e., a world constituted through selections of what is significant versus what is insignificant), is to in some way set a *direction* to move in amid some space of possibilities. But in order to set yourself a direction to move in, you must first be able to orient yourself in that space – to be able to make some sense of the possible directions and means of navigation.

Hence these indicative, referential, or signifying relations (constituting what we call ‘purpose’, ‘value’, or ‘significance’) presuppose a prior sense of ‘meaning’ in the more fundamental sense of a ‘horizon’ – a background against which the ways that these ‘signs’ are each ‘pointing’ can be understood. This would seem to suggest that these other senses of ‘meaning’ (and other related ones) are logically derivative of the ‘horizon’ sense.

This in turn suggests that if we were looking to raise the question of the most profound and all-encompassing upset to one’s sense of ‘meaning in life’ that one can experience – a questioning which already suggests that we ought to look for the most basic relevant sense of the term ‘meaning’ to explore, if there is any promise of finding one – we should look beyond some of these more ‘everyday’ senses of the term and begin with the ‘horizon’ sense.¹¹

¹¹ A similar claim of derivative status extends to the sense of ‘meaning’ espoused by many contemporary philosophical ‘intelligibility’ views as well – for example, that of Joshua Seachris (2019) – even though my view could also be loosely sorted under such a heading. This is because many of these views tend to focus on a narrow conception of ‘intelligibility’ in terms of ‘formulating a narrative of one’s existence’. This is doubtless a legitimate sense of ‘intelligibility-making’, but it should not be taken as the most

This is of course not to say that experiences of losing one's sense of purpose, of finding what once seemed significant to abruptly seem insignificant, or of questioning one's own 'values' are not legitimately called 'crises of meaning', or that they are not to be recognized as having their due gravity. Rather, the approach which sees each of these as derivatives of – and each potentially having its own interactions with – their commonly presupposed sense of meaning as 'horizon' gives us the resources to differentiate these experiences from one another and to treat each with its due respect. It also avoids the case where we might mistake a more profound issue for a more superficial one and so approach resolving it in a misguided way.

For example, many philosophers take it that concerns about 'meaning' are fundamentally concerns about purpose (interpreting 'purpose' as 'worthwhile projects'), and so the contemporary philosophical discussion about meaning often gets diverted into discussions about which projects should be considered 'worthwhile' and by whom.¹² Whether or not these discussions are themselves 'worthwhile', the question arises of how they might relate to accounts of 'meaninglessness' in, for example, the forms of ennui or *Angst* (wherein the world as a whole appears insignificant), where a collapse of one's values occurs (such as in the case of an abrupt loss of religious faith), or where one's very identity either as an individual or as a human being is disrupted. Not only this popular 'purpose' approach but many such competing approaches tend to either focus solely on the sense of 'meaning' which they presume to be most relevant to the exclusion of other senses, or else they sometimes risk attempting to reduce all of these aspects of meaning to their chosen sense, making a similar mistake to someone who tried to claim that all possible sentences in a language were actually assertions (or questions, or commands) because they can in principle be

fundamental, all-encompassing sense, even if only in the context of what is relevant for discussions of existential meaning. To see why, we need only consider that whatever is pieced together and 're-counted' (as a story) presupposes that it was first 'counted'. That is, what should be recognized as an 'event', much less a 'significant event', implies a whole series of prior distinctions between what is and is not potentially significant, which in turn presupposes a background against which to make such determinations. Put more simply, to tell a story about human existence, its origins for example, you must *already* have prepared an interpretation of what a human being is and some basis on which to have arrived at that conception, all of which I suggest is much more centrally consequential for concerns about existential meaning and is captured by my 'horizon' conception of intelligibility.

¹² A recently renewed interest and refocusing of the discussion along these lines often centers around the work of thinkers such as Susan Wolf, who espoused the now well-discussed 'hybrid view of meaning' with regard to pursuits and activities, summed up with the motto that "meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness," (Wolf 2002, 237).

grammatically rendered to fit that form.

In contrast, the viewpoint I am proposing here does claim a ‘fundamental’ sense of ‘meaning’ and suggests we focus our inquiry primarily upon it, but it does so by substantively differentiating this sense’s function from the others and affording each its proper place. Moreover, it helps us avoid a situation of ‘misdiagnosis’. While there are legitimate concerns surrounding dissatisfaction with purposes or values having to be given up, for example, these experiences are likely to lead to more profound ‘crises’ when the loss of a purpose, value, or some other significant dimension of one’s world connects to an inability to make sense of any non-arbitrary basis for a possible substitute. And this in turn is due to the person’s having lost sight of the organizing context which would enable this much. If someone has lost sight of the very conditions for the possibility of making anything like ‘purpose’, ‘value’, or ‘significance’ intelligible to themselves, then attempting to help them by offering ideas for new ‘worthwhile projects’, for example, is as helpful to them as offering to rebuild upon the same site their house which collapsed into a sinkhole without first securing new foundations for it.¹³

For example, someone with a staunchly scientific worldview might find any pursuits equally pointless ‘in the grand scheme of things’. Yet the more profound issue here is not the matter of whether they can find contentment in busying themselves with their (perhaps by their own admission arbitrarily) chosen pursuits. Rather the more profound threat to their sense of ‘meaning’ could eventually surface in the form of a sense of ‘not belonging (in existence)’ which may herald

¹³ Moreover, even setting aside a long history of the question of meaning being dismissed by a great many philosophers (and the public) as nonsense, much of the recent philosophical discussion of meaning – often aligned with the previously mentioned ‘purpose’ approach – has gotten diverted into matters alien to what suffers from ‘existential meaninglessness’ are plausibly concerned with.

For example, some higher profile debates center around whether certain ‘meaningful’ objects or pursuits are worthy of being considered ‘objectively meaningful’. Thinkers espousing such views of ‘objective meaningfulness’ often struggle to coherently articulate what they mean by ‘objectively meaningful’ – and there is undoubtedly at least one interpretation of it as ‘meaningful regardless of what anyone thinks about it’ which can be thrown out as self-contradictory regardless of how we interpret ‘meaning’ here – but we can speculate based on the context of the term’s usage. As Tartaglia (2016, 4) has observed, many such thinkers appear to use the term ‘objectively meaningful’ in something like the sense of ‘something that should be broadly socially accepted and affirmed as valuable’.

But it is implausible that someone suffering from a sense of lost *existential* meaning is particularly disoriented about what the society around them finds valuable. In fact, often they are well aware of and deeply dissatisfied with it, perhaps in some cases because they cannot see any stable and coherent basis for these values (or indeed such a basis for any act of valuation whatsoever).

Hence, this sort of response, the discourse surrounding it, and others like them which seem not to have thoroughly considered what the concerns of someone suffering from ‘meaninglessness’ might plausibly be, seem doomed to miss the point.

a full existential crisis. This could begin when they encounter – however indirectly – a tension between their understanding of themselves as a ‘conscious’ or ‘valuing’ agent and an understanding of themselves as primarily a material object among material objects, where what is called ‘conscious’ or ‘valuing’ seemingly cannot be attributed any reality or logical basis in a universe scientifically understood. This could begin as a merely grating philosophical quandary disposed of intellectually in this way or that, but it could also come to deeply disturb the person’s sense of identity, manifesting in ways which they did not directly associate with any such philosophical question. No doubt someone in this situation could be advised to busy themselves with this or that purpose, or subscribe to this or that value, but this would require them to deliberately narrow their field of vision and essentially avoid addressing the underlying tension. If they have reached the point where no such temporary solution can satisfy them, then such advice might only serve to further alienate them. Meanwhile, problematizing the horizon in terms of which they worked out their own self-conception – even if a straightforward, pre-prepared answer to address their concern might be difficult to come by – would at least speak more directly to their concerns and serve as a step toward more thoroughly addressing them.

In sum, the ‘horizon’ account’s ability to determine which senses of ‘meaning’ are derivative as opposed to more fundamental helps us bridge what might otherwise be a gap between, on the one hand, the use of systematic theoretical frameworks that make methodical philosophy possible (by allowing us to discuss meaning in terms of abstract distinctions and transcendental conditions of the possibility for experience), and, on the other, concrete concerns for meaning. It also helps us more precisely diagnose the varieties of experiences labeled as those of ‘meaninglessness’ and their associated concerns, ideally in turn helping us avoid offering superficial or ill-fitting solutions when addressing the concerns of those suffering from them.

Thirdly, and still concerning the potential concrete resonance some might find with the ‘horizon’ model of meaning, one of the most attractive and important features of this model concerns the resources with which it can discuss and contextualize the ‘alienation’ aspect of experiences of meaninglessness. Heidegger and Nietzsche, among other thinkers, each discuss meaning and meaninglessness in terms of ‘being at home’ or ‘homelessness’ in an existential sense. For example, Heidegger claims that in the mood of *Angst*, an experience of meaninglessness, one is confronted with human existence’s ‘uncanniness’

[*Unheimlichkeit* – literally ‘un-home-like-ness’], and it could be said that this experience involves a form of disorientation to as one’s ‘place’ in being.¹⁴ This ‘uncanniness’ is experienced in *Angst* as a concrete sense of alienation from one’s now unintelligible world and self, further implying a certain alienation from others as well.

Thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas¹⁵ took some amount of special interest in the ethical dimensions and dynamics of meaning-making (broadly in accordance with this conception of sense-making in terms of ‘horizon’ or ‘place’), but to my knowledge there has not been a significant-enough focus on such matters in more recent philosophical discussion.

4. Clarifications

Because I am speaking about situating human existence in ‘a broader context’ and understanding it ‘as a whole’, it may sound as though I am claiming access to some knowledge which would otherwise require a humanly impossible ‘God’s-eye view’.

Rather than this, I am suggesting that some philosophers thinking about meaning have too hastily taken the impossibility of ‘getting outside’ of the human perspective as warrant to say that any talk of ‘existential meaning’ must therefore either be ‘merely subjective’, properly relegated only to matters of the ‘supernatural’, or else simply nonsensical.¹⁶ Such thinkers have overlooked the

¹⁴ SZ 186-8. Elsewhere, I have argued that there are intimate connections in Heidegger’s thought between his choices to speak of existential meaning sometimes in terms of ‘horizon’ and other times in terms of ‘(being at) home’ throughout his corpus of works (Rule 2021). The passage cited above sees Heidegger drawing the connection between these images relatively explicitly, however. To intuitively grasp the nature of the connection, consider the conceptual symmetry and overlap between two senses of understanding one’s ‘place’: firstly in the sense of being oriented toward one’s surroundings (with help from a point of orientation or horizon) and secondly in the sense of knowing where one ‘belongs’ (i.e., how one can ‘be at home’ in their [activity of] ‘dwelling’).

¹⁵ Levinas’ seminal treatise *Totality and Infinity* [TI] (1961) can be read as practically a book-length sustained critique of Heidegger for the latter’s failure to sufficiently recognize the ethical presuppositions of his own philosophy, most centrally his conception of meaning. However, for examples of more condensed, albeit specially-focused, treatments of relevant ideas, see “Heidegger, Gagarin, and Us” (1961) and “Ethics as First Philosophy” (1984).

¹⁶ Nor should my objections to these labels be taken to imply that I would really prefer my view to be categorized as an ‘objectivist’ or ‘naturalist’ account of meaning. These distinctions (objective/subjective, natural/supernatural, and, I would add, ‘meaning of’ / ‘meaning in’) themselves are already situated with regard to a very specific ‘horizon’ and understanding of the nature of the human being, one which cannot be simply taken for granted – as often seems to be the case when it comes to investigating the broader question of existential meaning. Whether they are significant distinctions, and

possibility that one can get an admittedly finite but still very informative sense of context from *within* that context under the right conditions. Again, consider that this is precisely the situation with regard to our everyday relationship to a visible horizon. Keeping such a situation in mind, it would be absurd to insist, analogously, that one would have to have in view all of space at once in order to have an understanding of spatiality.

In contrast, in the case of a horizon, the limit of our vision itself enters into view, though in such a way as to provide us some indirect understanding of what possibly lies beyond that limit, in an analogous manner to how the drawing of a binary conceptual distinction (such as ‘Good/Evil’, ‘Phenomenon/Noumenon’, or the like) grants some relatively undifferentiated yet still potentially useful definition to what lies on the distinction’s ‘outside’ – if nothing else than by enabling finer-grained distinctions to be made which organize information regarding what falls on the distinction’s ‘inside’.

In sum, I have no intention of suggesting that we should ever consider venturing into some supposed realm beyond all human intelligibility in order to ask about a sense of ‘the meaning of human life’ that (somehow, paradoxically) might bear on human life. And yet I do think that my account should allow an existential meaning (as ‘horizon’) to in principle be potentially ‘sharable’ to whatever extent ‘a common world’ might be shareable.

5. Conclusion

Whether God, death, or something else entirely, appropriately answers the question of existential meaning – i.e., most completely and coherently delineates the limit of human existence in a way which allows us to optimally make sense of ourselves and our world – I have not attempted to address here.¹⁷ Rather, I have

in which contexts, can be decided only after the question has been seriously taken up and worked through.
¹⁷ However, what I have said here may suggest some starting points for some possible methods for investigation into the question.

Firstly, there are existing methods like that of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology, which led to his actual conclusion on this matter, discussed above. Many might find his answer, that ‘death’ is the circumscribing background context of ‘life’, to be unappealing at first glance. But even if, in the last analysis, it is found wanting as an answer, I think we ought not to dismiss it too hastily. It is important to keep in mind, for one thing, that the ‘death’ which Heidegger claims may act as our authentic horizon is not to be understood on our commonsensical conception. He is not simply saying that we should consider the fact that we will die and organize our daily lives accordingly. Rather, death here is understood as “the possibility of the impossibility of an existence at all”, where ‘existence’ here has the meaning of selection between existential possibilities (i.e., possible ways of being, interpreting oneself

only attempted to gesture at how reconceiving the question itself could help us better grasp and address the concerns which underlie it. However, I suggest that this interpretation of the question holds the most promise in affording us a way forward in its serious philosophical exploration.

Much contemporary discussion on meaning tends to avoid asking whether there is some unifying conception of ‘meaning’ with regard to which the whole constellation of senses of the term may be understood, and it likewise risks missing significant senses – perhaps even *the* essential sense – of the term entirely, such as that which I have associated with ‘horizons’.

What if it should turn out that the nature of the question lends itself to its own distortion and obscurity? Every thinker who approaches it will tend to view it from within a particular ‘horizon’ and subsequently according to a particular conception of the human being, oftentimes without recognizing that their own

at the most basic levels, and in turn interpreting one’s world) (SZ 262). Moreover, he insists that death in this sense should be understood precisely in its status as a possibility and therefore something that is implicit in our experience at each moment, as we should expect for a *phenomenological* account of death (which is not to be confused with psychological or biological accounts of coping with dying, for instance) (246-249). In other words, if he is correct, when properly understood, something about the nature of how we experience ‘death’ (and hence ‘life’) helps to inform us about what and who we are: existentially self-interpretive beings and individuals carrying our own responsibility for how we so interpret ourselves and thus shape our own ‘being’. If this is right, then ‘death’ could very much serve as a horizon in that it might provide us with a basis for interpreting human existence taken as a whole, as Heidegger claims (264). In order to decide for ourselves whether this is true, we will have to follow along with the steps of his account, and compare our own experience to it (while keeping a self-critical eye to how our prejudices might tend to shape the interpretation of that experience).

Levinas would object to his view being taken straightforwardly as an answer to the question of existential meaning on the model of a ‘horizon’ in what he takes to be Heidegger’s conception of that term. Nonetheless, it would seem fair to say that Levinas employs a distinction which serves a broadly analogous role in his philosophy – in his case, the distinction between “the I” and “the Other” (person), or – as the title of his work suggests – “Totality and Infinity”. And this conclusion too is arrived at via a (broadly-construed) phenomenological approach (see TI 194-216). This more ethically-oriented approach to meaning is at least as worthy of serious consideration as Heidegger’s.

Finally, if my proposal about the relationship of a ‘horizon’ to its derivative distinctions holds true, there should in principle be a certain logic of distinctions that can be traced back, from even the most basic binary distinction helping constitute one of our everyday concepts, to the conditions of the possibility for that distinction’s intelligibility (also itself a distinction), and to the conditions of that further distinction, and so on, until the most fundamental intelligible distinction is ascertained. A method which exploits this logic of distinctions and their interrelations is not limited to phenomenology. In fact, something of this sort has already been outlined by George Spencer Brown (1969) and applied by ‘systems theorists’ such as Niklaas Luhmann and his predecessors. Incidentally, such viewpoints take special interest in the important issues of relativity to the observer and constraints – in Luhmann’s case, historical developments in the conditions of society’s organization – involved in the drawing of such primary distinctions, as well as the paradoxes which gradually reveal themselves from attempts at drawing inadequate ones. [For further discussion, see Luhmann (1986).] Due to my awareness of views like these, my current proposal should be taken to remain neutral on the question of whether there is such a thing as one ‘final’ (for all time and under all circumstances) proper horizon to be found.

presuppositions will determine what significance can be attributed to the question in the first place and what possible shapes it may take.

Indeed, there is often a prevailing sense amid the contemporary discourse that it remains poorly understood whether or why this question should be one that is possible in the first place, let alone a sense of why it is worth asking. And to the extent that dedicated philosophical discussion of the question has reignited more recently, that discussion has tended to become diverted into the same philosophical eddies as much ‘value theory’ historically has been, held hostage by the often unquestioned conceptions of the human being which underlie and shape the discussion’s prevailing terms.

To the extent that we cannot fully set such prejudices aside, it may be prudent as a method of inquiry to start by acting as if the question is intelligible, universal, and fundamentally important, as its ‘pretensions’ suggest, and then to show how that might be possible; if for no other reason than that it might help us prepare ourselves to seriously, directly speak to the concerns of the person who voices claims to suffer over ‘meaninglessness’ and seeks orientation. Philosophy cannot be expected to hand down authoritative ready-made answers to questions, nor must it presume that every question is equally well-formed or of perennial import, but perhaps the philosopher, of all people, can be expected to make an effort to look past their own prejudices to understand the concerns of others, and to invite them into a cooperative dialogue and shared activity of questioning.

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