

Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.6

Selected Papers from the Liverpool Conference

Edited by

Michael Hauskeller

Journal of Philosophy of Life



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Conference*

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Preface

The question what, if anything, makes our life meaningful, has in recent years received considerable critical attention from philosophers. Yet meaning in life continues to be a fascinatingly rich topic with plenty of aspects that remain controversial or have not been sufficiently explored yet. For instance, how much difference is there between individuals in terms of what makes life meaningful for us? How much difference is there between cultures? Are non-human animals capable of living meaningful lives? Can inanimate things have a meaningful existence, and if so, is what makes their existence meaningful also what makes human existence meaningful? Is there such a thing as anti-meaning? How do we decide which activities are objectively valuable and which not? Do we have a right to meaning? If so, does it follow that as a society we have an obligation to provide people with what they need to live meaningful lives? Why do we care about meaning in the first place? What exactly would be lost if our life was meaningless? How is meaning in life affected by the changes brought about by the rapid technological advancements we are currently witnessing? Is AI perhaps a greater threat to our ability to live meaningful lives than it is to our survival?

These and other questions were discussed at the *6th International Conference on Meaning in Life*, which took place over three days in June 2024 at the University of Liverpool. The event was organised by me and my postgraduate students Michalina Bevoor, Liam Shore, Neil Williams, and Tom Gardiner, and was attended by more than eighty delegates from twenty different countries. The keynote speakers were Tatjana Schnell, Kieran Setiya, and James Tartaglia.

I am very grateful to this journal's editor, Professor Masahiro Morioka, and the other members of the steering committee, all presenters and participants, and everyone else who helped make this conference the enjoyable and engaging event that it was.

After the conference we invited all presenters to submit their paper to the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* and then, after review, selected four of them for this special issue.

Michael Hauskeller

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January 15, 2025.

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Neutral Nihilism

Why Nihilism Is Neither Good nor Bad

James Tartaglia*

Abstract

I defend an evaluatively neutral interpretation of nihilism against the negative and positive alternatives, arguing that Negative Nihilism and Sunny Nihilism fail to grasp the significance of nihilism's claim that there is no cosmic goal to human life, and thereby misinterpret a descriptive claim about the nature of human life as if it were an evaluative claim being made within a social context. Nihilism might seem negative or positive to certain individuals, but only because of the nature of their previously held false beliefs about meaning. Through three counterfactual scenarios, I show that unless the meaning of life involves a non-manifest reward or punishment, its presence or absence is a matter for indifference.

1. Some Definitions and the Aim of the Paper

By “nihilism” I mean the view that there is no meaning of life, that life is meaningless.¹ I believe this existential sense of the word to be the historically dominant one, as well as the best known in the contemporary world; I have defended the former in a limited fashion² and am currently in the process, with my colleague Stephen Leach, of providing a more extensive historical defence. Probably the second most significant usage, at least in academic philosophy, is to be found in Nietzsche and Heidegger and is the idea of a historical process of the degradation of value, akin to Kierkegaard's “levelling”.³ That is not what I am talking about in this paper. When I talk about “nihilism” I am talking about the view that there is no meaning of life.

By “meaning of life” I mean our cosmic purpose, the goal we were created to

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¹ Tartaglia (2016a).

² Tartaglia and Llanera (2021), chapter 2.

³ Kierkegaard (1846), pp. 86-96. Nietzsche defines nihilism this way at the very beginning of *The Will to Power* (Nietzsche 1883-8, p. 9), a collection of notes not organised by him and never intended for publication; it was Heidegger's primary source for Nietzsche. *The Will to Power* also contains plenty of uses of “nihilism” in the standard existential sense (even his initial definition in terms of Kierkegaardian levelling includes it: “The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer”), as well as other senses he seems to have been experimenting with at the time.

fulfil, or must fulfil to play our part in the cosmic unfurling of the universe towards our ultimate goal, perhaps *the* ultimate goal. The Greeks called it the *telos agathôn* and all the major Greek schools took a stance on what it was, influenced by much older ideas in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indian philosophy⁴ – only the label “meaning of life” is modern. As with “nihilism”, I believe the existential and teleological sense of “the meaning of life” is the historically dominant one⁵, and it is unquestionably the best known in the contemporary world.

A related concept is meaning *in* life, which concerns the meaningfulness of certain human activities as opposed to others. This more secular and individualist offshoot of the older concept developed over the course of the 20th century, with the terminological distinction between meaning *in* and *of* first made by Kurt Baier.⁶ Meaning in life is not what I shall be talking about in this paper, although I have recently defended a new account of it.⁷ It is clearly a different concept, because whether there is a cosmic purpose or not, it could still be the case that some of our activities are more “meaningful” than others in a non-cosmic sense; what this sense amounts to, or can be engineered into, is another question. In this paper I shall only be talking about the meaning of life and the nihilist’s denial that there is one.

I shall not be arguing for nihilism, although I do believe it.⁸ Rather, my primary aim is to persuade you that when considering nihilism, you should, as your default position, be interpreting it in an evaluatively neutral way. That is, you should consider it as a possibility that is neither good nor bad, rather as if you were considering the possibility that dinosaurs were brightly coloured – significant, interesting, amazing even, but not an appropriate focus for regret or celebration. This is not to deny that relative to your other beliefs nihilism might seem good or bad; bad more typically, because of the cultural influence of religion. Accepting the truth of nihilism need not be a matter for reluctance and regret, however, and I shall argue that to think otherwise is a confusion, one which we are ready to advance beyond.

The three ways of interpreting nihilism I shall look at are Negative Nihilism, Sunny Nihilism and Neutral Nihilism. Negative Nihilism is the standard and practically universal interpretation according to which if nihilism is true then this

⁴ Uzdaviny (2010).

⁵ Tartaglia and Leach (2018).

⁶ Baier (1957), p. 101.

⁷ Tartaglia (2024a), pp. 183-191.

⁸ Tartaglia (2016a); Tartaglia and Llanera (2021).

represents a very poor state of affairs, perhaps even the worst one possible. Sunny Nihilism is the recently emerged interpretation of nihilism as positive, while Neutral Nihilism denies that nihilism motivates an evaluation of life.

This paper will proceed as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, I will define Negative Nihilism and explain its rationale, then give my reasons for rejecting it. In Sections 4 and 5, I will do the same for Sunny Nihilism. In Section 6, I will define Neutral Nihilism and give its rationale. In Section 7, I will discuss three counterfactual scenarios which favour Neutral Nihilism over the Negative and Sunny alternatives. In Section 8, I will speculate on the historical and psychological root of people interpreting nihilism negatively. Section 9 lists my four conclusions.

2. Negative Nihilism – Definition and Rationale

Negative Nihilism makes two claims:

- 1) Human life is meaningless (hence “nihilism”).
- 2) Recognising (1) rationally compels a highly negative evaluation of human life, perhaps even a complete condemnation (hence “negative”).

Negative Nihilism is what people usually mean by “nihilism”, always before the 20th century and overwhelmingly to this day. The second claim about being rationally compelled is required because the first is not in itself an evaluation, it just claims that our lives lack cosmic purpose and whether or not that is a good thing is debatable. Similarly, to say that smoking causes cancer is not in and of itself to evaluate smoking, but instead just to state a fact about smoking, one which would rationally compel most people to form a negative evaluation of smoking.⁹ Historically, and to this day, the prospect of nihilism being true has been thought to compel not just a negative evaluation of human life, but a highly negative one, perhaps even a complete condemnation.

I shall now present four reasons for favouring the negative interpretation of nihilism. They are the main ones I am aware of, but if there are others unaffected by the critique that I will go on to present, then that would be a promising line of response for a defender of Negative Nihilism.

⁹ Or, strictly speaking, just a *more* negative evaluation, since the smoker might still evaluate smoking positively overall, just less positively given their concerns about cancer.

- a) To say that something is “pointless” is to evaluate it negatively. If human life is itself pointless then everything we do is pointless, so nihilism is the ultimate, all-encompassing negative evaluation of pointlessness.
- b) If nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction all lack value. A meaningless life is consequently a worthless one, and to say that something is worthless is a negative evaluation.
- c) If nihilism is true, then there is no reason to act, nor even to carry on living, because any reason that might be given is undermined by nihilism.
- d) When individuals die their achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are forgotten, and this may be our collective fate in human extinction. So, if nihilism is true then our achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are ephemeral and without value.

3. Negative Nihilism – Critique

According to (a), “X is pointless” is a negative evaluation of X. This is usually true, and the reason is that human life is goal-directed. We are naturally teleological creatures who live by setting ourselves goals, or having them set for us, whether by others or our own biological instincts.¹⁰ Once we have a goal we try to achieve it. If we fail we are frustrated and either keep trying or move onto a new goal. If we succeed we move onto a new goal and if we have no goals we tend to feel useless, bored or depressed.

As such, “X is pointless” is usually a condemnation because it states that X does not contribute to our goals. For example, if you saw somebody repeatedly striking wet matches you might condemn their activity as pointless because they will never achieve their goal of lighting the match in that manner. There is no point striking wet matches, but there is a point to striking dry ones because doing so achieves a human goal. Note that if we change the goal, then striking wet matches need no longer be pointless, so these judgements are entirely relative to our goals. For example, a comedian repeatedly striking wet matches to make people laugh is only pretending to do something pointless, the real point is to amuse – and thus to put on a good show, please her manager, progress her career, buy a house, and so on. The “and so on” eventually peters out into nothing

¹⁰ Tartaglia (2016a), chapter 1.

according to the nihilist, whereas the believer in a meaning of life thinks it terminates in a cosmic achievement.

“X is pointless” is usually a condemnation, then, as is “X is meaningless”. It is not always a condemnation, however, because few people would be Puritanical enough to insist that everything we do must have a clearly defined purpose, otherwise it is to be condemned, and it would be Puritanical Fundamentalism to go as far as to require that everything we do must be in service of The Meaning of Life. If you went that far, it would be hard to avoid condemning brushing your teeth. For does keeping your teeth healthy really contribute to the cosmic purpose? If you think it does, you need to justify your view by saying what the cosmic purpose is, because unless you know that, you cannot know that brushing your teeth helps. The most popular answer in human history is that our cosmic purpose is to worship God – I think we could do that perfectly well with bad teeth.

Most people, however, recognise that pointless activities can be fun, and so long as they are harmless, would not condemn them. You could be a devout Christian and still enjoy some pointless jumping around with your kids, surely. There are plenty of activities in our lives that lack a point even in relation to our wider goals, let alone in relation a cosmic goal. Since we must have learned “X is pointless” judgements from our daily activities, then superimposed that form of judgement onto life as a whole in our metaphysical speculations, the fact that the everyday judgements are not always condemnations, combined with the fact that the metaphysical case seems obviously very different, renders irrelevant that fact that “X is pointless” is *usually* used negatively. It is usually used negatively in everyday life, true enough, but when we make the metaphysical claim of nihilism we are no longer talking about everyday life.

The more serious flaw in the reasoning behind (a), however, is that if there are no cosmic goals for us to achieve, as nihilism claims, then it simply cannot be a bad thing that our lives fail to contribute to those goals – *for there are no goals, they do not exist*, so there is no sense in which we are failing to achieve “them”. In everyday life, we condemn things as pointless when they fail to contribute to our goals. But in metaphysics, we cannot be condemning life by saying that it is pointless / meaningless, because if we were, then we would be presupposing that there is a cosmic goal which human life fails to contribute to.

This seems to me to be the main misunderstanding behind Negative Nihilism – it fails to understand that nihilism undermines any reason for assuming that not contributing to a goal would be a bad thing in the case of human life as a whole.

Such an assumption requires there to be a valued goal that is not being contributed to by human life, hence the condemnation, but nihilism is the view that there are no such goals. As such, Negative Nihilism is ultimately rooted in a conceptual confusion, one firmly rooted in our history. If nihilism strikes you as obviously bad, since pointless / meaningless things are bad, then that is because you have failed to understand the claim, which is a denial of goals, not a statement of regret about our failure to achieve them.

Arguments (b) and (c) exhibit the same confusion in different ways – the problem is again that a judgement about life is being illicitly modelled on a judgement within our goal-directed lives, and in this way it is mistakenly thought that life is being condemned, even though such a condemnation only makes sense in terms of presupposed goals, and so is impossible from the perspective of nihilism's denial of goals. Thus, according to (b):

if nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction all lack value. A meaningless life is consequently a worthless one, and to say that something is worthless is a negative evaluation.

All that can legitimately be said, however, is that if nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction lack *cosmic* value. If nihilism is true, then human achievement, pleasure and satisfaction never had any cosmic value, it only had value to us human beings; it still does and it always will so long as we continue to exist. Only the Puritanical Fundamentalist could think that if nihilism were true then all achievement, pleasure and satisfaction has been had under false pretences, since it was only ever possible on the false premise of cosmic purpose. You do not need to believe in cosmic purpose to think that saving a child from drowning is a valuable thing to do, nor indeed to value a good meal, human relationships, intellectual and artist achievement, or your own health and wellbeing. Perhaps all of this has cosmic value too, but it is valuable to humans whether or not it does. Once again, the root of the mistake is to think that a judgement *within* human life about what has value vs. what is worthless can be applied to the nihilist claim. Worthlessness in life is what does not contribute to our goals, or what obstructs them. Nihilism is not saying that our lives fail to contribute to, or obstruct, the cosmic purpose, it is denying its existence.

My response to (c) is largely the same. This time the claim is that accepting nihilism would undermine all your reasons for acting, and perhaps even for

carrying on living – Camus’s “one truly serious philosophical question”.¹¹ But that is simply not true. The claim is just that there is no cosmic reason to act, all of the ordinary, terrestrial ones remain. A strong swimmer who sees a child drowning has every reason to act, and if he would not act unless he thought the rescue would contribute to the cosmic purpose, then he is not only a Puritanical Fundamentalist, he is a monster. Or to bring the examples back down to earth, if I fancy a beer that gives me a good reason to go to the pub, whether I believe in a meaning of life or not.

The fourth line of argument is different from the others since it concerns death, which, as I shall hypothesise in Section 8, is at the root of irrational dread of nihilism. According to (d):

when individuals die their achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are forgotten, and this may be our collective fate in human extinction. So, if nihilism is true then our achievements, pleasure and satisfaction are ephemeral and hence without value.

This makes about as much sense as refusing to eat because the meal will end or refusing to go on holiday because the holiday will end. The only achievements, pleasure and satisfaction humans have ever experienced is ephemeral, if the everlasting kind exists none of us has started having it yet, so we are hardly in a position to disparage the former on the basis of the latter, when the latter is a mere speculation based entirely on our familiarity with the former. You might as well condemn human music on the grounds that it lacks value in comparison with the eternal music of the celestial spheres.

Why would the thought that my life may be forgotten undermine the value I and others place in it now? When I am dead and forgotten my life will not have value anymore, but it had value while I was alive. Of course, I am very small and short-lived compared to a massive asteroid hurtling through distant unknown space, and so insignificant in comparison to it in terms of size and age. But that does not mean the asteroid is more valuable than me – I am more valuable to myself, to my family and friends, and if there is human-independent objective value then I would have thought being alive and conscious is more important than being big and old.¹²

¹¹ Camus (1940), p. 11.

¹² These confused thoughts about our supposed insignificance have been used to motivate the

4. Sunny Nihilism – Definition and Rationale

Sunny Nihilism makes two claims:

- 1) Human life is meaningless (hence “nihilism”).
- 2) Recognising (1) rationally compels an evaluation of human life which is more positive than it would otherwise be (hence “sunny”).

Sunny Nihilism is an online phenomenon that has arisen only recently among Generations Y, Z and Alpha, and which takes its name from the title of a book which crystallizes the phenomenon, Wendy Syfret’s *The Sunny Nihilist: How a Meaningless Life Can Make You Truly Happy*.¹³ Syfret is a journalist, not a philosopher, but she is philosophically astute enough to channel an interesting thought that has emerged within a young public prepared to question whether nihilism is really as bad as it is made out to be. Is it not simply a religious prejudice to think life must have a holy purpose to be good? These generations, with Syfret as their eloquent spokesperson, have also asked whether it might not be a big relief that the traditional religious idea of holy purpose is phony, along with its secular descendant of having more or less meaning in your life, because that means we are not tied into its traditional, moralistic prescriptions and can do whatever we ourselves think best.

Syfret became a Sunny Nihilist in a road-to-Damascus moment. She was getting stressed at work and it was making matters worse that she kept thinking she was wasting her life on pointless activities, when she ought to be making her life meaningful. One evening on the walk home from work it all became too much for her, she doubled over gasping for breath, psychologically worn down by the pressure of the need to live a meaningful life, when it suddenly occurred to her that, “*I’m just a chunk of meat hurtling through space on a rock. Futile and meaningless.*” And “the sense of relief was immediate”.¹⁴ The following is what

judgement that human life is absurd; for an analysis focusing on Nagel and Camus, see Tartaglia 2016a: 44-8.

¹³ Syfret (2021). The idea had been thought of before, such as by Nietzsche, who in 1886 remarked (again in his private notebooks – the same ones as *The Will to Power*, but here I use an improved edition), “What a sensation it is to feel, as we freed spirits feel, that we are not harnessed up to a system of ‘ends’!” (Nietzsche 1885-8: 99). Nietzsche certainly toyed with Sunny Nihilism, then, but in the works he published he always interpreted nihilism negatively, as he does in most of his notes too.

¹⁴ Syfret (2021), p. 14; italics original.

I think her reasoning to this conclusion amounts to:

- a) The idea of meaning is oppressive – it “creates hierarchies of how we spend our time and assign value”¹⁵, thereby adding to our stress levels and making us feel inadequate.
- b) Not believing in a meaning of life allows us to better appreciate passing pleasures and live for the day.
- c) When individuals die their achievements, pleasures and satisfaction are forgotten, and this may be our collective fate in human extinction. So, we should make the most of life while we still have it.

I have sympathy for (a) and (b), but not (c), which takes the same premise as Negative Nihilism’s (d) but draws a different conclusion, an equally spurious one. (a) is close to something I have argued myself, namely that the idea of a cosmic goal can be oppressive, since it provides a standard by which our lives are to be judged and with which we are not allowed to disagree.¹⁶ And it can also be dangerous too, since it can be used to motivate any measures required to realise the human destiny, regardless of the collateral damage – for example, the idea that our cosmic purpose is to perfect ourselves, and that eugenics is the best technological means to that end.¹⁷ It was dissatisfaction with this rather dictatorial element to the traditional idea of the meaning of life which led to more individualist notions of meaning *in* life developing over the course of the 20th century; although as Syfret’s case bears witness, the oppressiveness seems to have remained.

5. Sunny Nihilism – Critique

The problem with (a) is that although the meaning of life could be seen as oppressive, it could also be seen as liberating, comforting or inspiring – it entirely depends on both the nature of the meaning and the person who believes in it, as Syfret herself is aware.¹⁸ The meaning of life is not going to seem oppressive to a Christian Saint, and to the Platonist tradition stemming from Plotinus it was

¹⁵ Syfret (2021), p. 143.

¹⁶ Tartaglia (2016a), pp. 12-19.

¹⁷ Tartaglia (2016b); Tartaglia (2020), chapter 5; Tartaglia and Llanera (2021), chapter 1.

¹⁸ Syfret (2021), pp. 134-135.

regarded as positively liberating, the ultimate aspiration – since they thought the meaning of life was to leave our bodies to live like gods. The kind of meaning Syfret believed in made her negatively evaluate her own life, so when she realised she did not believe in this meaning anymore she was elated, because her life no longer seemed so bad. The realisation of meaningless made her happy, then, but not because it told her something good about human life. It made her happy because it removed her previous false beliefs about the meaning of life, the false beliefs that were making her sad.

Coming to believe in nihilism might be a cause for celebration, then, but only if you were previously oppressed by your belief in a meaning of life, just as it might be a cause for despair in people who were heavily invested in the thought that there is a wonderful meaning of life. There is no more reason to evaluate nihilism positively than negatively, however, since all it states is that there is no meaning of life; it is not stating that we are released from a bad meaning or deprived of a good one. Any evaluatively neutral fact can provoke a negative or positive evaluation, depending on the context, but that does not make the fact itself bad – it is just bad for you that it is a fact, given the surrounding context. For example, the fact that I have written the number three might cause you delight if it means you win a million pounds, but despair if it means you will be executed.

According to (b), nihilism allows us to better appreciate passing pleasures and live for the day, but once again it depends on your previous beliefs in a meaning of life. To feel this way, your previous beliefs must have diminished your appreciation of passing pleasures, as Syfret's evidently did. Others might believe in a meaning of life that accentuates the passing pleasures of life, although admittedly this has most emphatically *not* been the historical tendency, which has rather been to downplay and even despise our embodied pleasures in favour of higher cosmic significances. Nevertheless, a hedonistic religion is a possibility, and even with an ordinary, otherworldly religion, the believer might still find more pleasure in their daily routine because they think they are serving their god or gods. So, the realisation of nihilism could make you happier and more willing to live for the day, or do the opposite, or have no such effect on you either way; and I know the latter is a possibility because that is how it was for me.¹⁹

¹⁹ When it first occurred to me that nihilism is the answer to the question of the meaning of life, it did not strike me as either elating or depressing, only interesting – I could see all kinds of connections between the traditional problems of philosophy and the motive of avoiding nihilism, connections of the kind I explore in *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life* (Tartaglia 2016a). The book is not an argument for nihilism, as tends to be assumed from the title, but rather an attempt to understand philosophical

Argument (c) is just a rehash of Negative Nihilism's (d), as previously noted, except this time we are no longer seeing ephemerality as a cause for despair, but rather as something which allows us to fully appreciate life. But recognising value as ephemeral need not enhance it. We typically place greater value in what is long-lived; you can have a relationship with a horse, but not with a fly that only lives for a day. Usually when we are liking something, such as a holiday, we do not want it to end. I think this is the standard attitude to life so long as it is going reasonably well, which is why when life-extension technologies become available they will be a massive commercial success. Even eternal bliss sounds perfectly good to me in principle, although I would have to check the details before committing.²⁰ So, the reasoning behind (c) is poor, just like the reasoning behind (d); although once again death is definitely relevant to how we greet thoughts of nihilism, as I will try to explain later.

6. Neutral Nihilism – Definition and Rationale

Neutral Nihilism makes two claims:

- 1) Human life is meaningless (hence “nihilism”).
- 2) Recognising (1) does not rationally compel an evaluation of human life because being meaningless in this sense is neither good nor bad (hence “neutral”).

This is my own view,²¹ that of Tracy Llanera when we wrote together,²² and it is also the official view of Aribiah Attoe,²³ although he vacillates considerably.²⁴

views on the assumption that life is meaningless. It is about how philosophy looks *in a meaningless life*, one in which it is falsely taken for granted that meaninglessness, if true, would be a cause for despair. Before I realised I was a nihilist I did not believe in a meaning of life, I had just never thought seriously about the issue, so had no view either way. (I think this autobiographical note is justified, given that philosophers typically display such strongly negative reactions to nihilism that I often suspect they do not really believe any other reaction is humanly possible, at least among those who understand the issues.)

²⁰ See Tartaglia (2020), pp. 158ff. and 172-178.

²¹ Tartaglia (2016a).

²² Tartaglia and Llanera (2021).

²³ Attoe (2023).

²⁴ Attoe states his adherence to the Neutral Nihilist position quite clearly at a key juncture of his book (Attoe 2023: 165-188, esp. 176), but then repeatedly interprets nihilism very negatively, as if deep down he agrees with the Negative Nihilist – and the final conclusion of the book cannot be read as neutral at all, he is clearly depressed by the thought of nihilism (ibid.: 199). I think he is most

Apart from myself, Llanera and Attoe, I am unaware of any other defenders of Neutral Nihilism, although the idea has certainly been discussed,²⁵ and Thaddeus Metz seems to be edging into our camp by arguing that nihilism is not as bad as pessimists like David Benatar portray it.²⁶ But Metz still takes it for granted that absence of cosmic meaning is “absence of a good”²⁷, albeit not one we should be overly concerned about, so he remains in the Negative Nihilist camp for now, at least.

My rationale for Neutral Nihilism can be put in the form of the following argument:

Premise 1: If there is a meaning of life, then there is a metaphysically authoritative way of understanding human life of the kind required to evaluate life positively, negatively or neutrally.

Premise 2: If nihilism is true, there is no metaphysically authoritative way of understanding human life of the kind required to evaluate life positively, negatively or neutrally.

Conclusion: Therefore, the nihilist assertion that there is no meaning of life cannot amount to, include, or require an evaluation of human life, because if what is being asserted is true, then there is no metaphysically authoritative way of understanding human life of the kind required to make such an evaluation.

So, to make the reasoning a little more concrete, suppose an all-powerful and all-knowing God exists who knows the meaning of life. He knows exactly why we exist, he grasps it perfectly within his metaphysically authoritative understanding of human life, and He sees that life is a good thing (because our existence contributes to His cosmic purposes, perhaps), or a bad thing (because we sin so much that we interfere with His cosmic purposes, perhaps), or a neutral thing (because our lives make no difference to His cosmic purposes). But now suppose nihilism is true. In that case there is no cosmic purpose for our lives to either contribute to, detract from, or be irrelevant to. So, we should not seek to evaluate life in terms of cosmic purpose. We could still evaluate it in other terms, such as

charitably interpreted as a Neutral Nihilist who cannot help having a negative reaction to nihilism, even though he realises he should not (Tartaglia 2024b).

²⁵ Karr (1992); Marmysz (2003).

²⁶ Metz (2022).

²⁷ Metz (2022), p. 50.

the balance of pleasure to pain, but once the idea of a metaphysically authoritative evaluation is rejected, this endeavour looks arbitrary and absurd.

To see this, suppose we choose the balance of pleasure and pain as our basis for evaluation, as has been the most popular approach among disappointed unbelievers since the mid-19th century. Well, there are currently about 8.2 billion people in the world – how could anyone have confidence in their *a priori* reasoning about whether the aggregate pain outweighs the pleasure or *vice versa*? How could you empirically test it? Even if you somehow could, perhaps with AI superintelligence, then this would give us no reason to believe life will always be more painful than pleasurable, or that it always has been in the past. And the choice of pleasure and pain seems arbitrary anyway – why not evaluate human life on the basis of artistic achievement, or philosophical wisdom, or scientific knowledge? If we are no longer talking about the reason for which we exist, then you might as well choose sporting achievement; on that basis we are perhaps the most valuable beings in existence.

It seems to me, then, that if human life is not here for a cosmic reason, if it simply exists for no reason, then we are not here for a good reason, such as to evolve into a ball of cosmic bliss, or for a bad reason, such as to suffer, for a middling reason that has both good and bad elements, or for a reason which is irrelevant to the cosmic purpose. We are not here for a reason at all – that is the claim of nihilism, so nihilism is not offering an evaluation of life. If you believe in a meaning of life then you may be offering an evaluation of life, and given the history of this idea you almost certainly are, but if you are a nihilist you are not.

7. Three Counterfactual Test Cases

Case 1: Not bad, could have been better.

In World 1, the meaning of life is to worship a good deity.

In World 2, nihilism is true.

Person A in World 1 and Person B in World 2 are doppelgängers living physically and psychologically identical lives of devout worship.

So, A has it right and B has it wrong. A is worshipping a good deity and that is what he is supposed to be doing, that is the meaning of life, the reason he was brought into existence by the deity, his cosmic purpose. B, on the other hand, is worshipping

a fiction, and hence is wasting his time, except to the extent that he enjoys worshipping, or receives intellectual satisfaction from it, or some other positive consequence – although whether he would regard the consequences as positive if he knew his deity was fictional is highly doubtful.

A's life is better in this situation, because it is meaningful in a good way, whereas B thinks his life is meaningful in a good way but is wrong. But B's life is only worse in a trivial, counterfactual way, so long as A is not going to receive concrete rewards for his efforts, such as eternal bliss in heaven. We must assume this because otherwise A's and B's lives would be different, one of them would include an afterlife, and we are supposed to be considering a case in which they are exactly the same except for whether there is a meaning of life or not, in order to ascertain whether the truth of nihilism would make life worse. And it seems to me that it would only make it worse in a trivial, counterfactual way. Nihilism prevents B's life from having cosmically good meaning, so counterfactually he misses out, but it does not otherwise make his life any more or less valuable. This is as trivial as accepting that I have counterfactually missed out by not belonging to a human race that has an average life expectancy of 150 years old, or one which experiences twice as much pleasure when eating. I suppose that is true, but I am equally lucky, in a correspondingly trivial sense, that I do not belong to a human race that has an average life expectancy of 40 years old, or one which experiences half as much pleasure when eating.

On the other hand, B misses out in a non-trivial way by believing in a good deity that does not exist. He goes to church and prays under false pretences, and hence uses that time in a way that could be put to better use. Falsely believing in the meaning of life can make your life actually worse, whereas falsely believing in nihilism is risk-free, so long as adhering to the meaning of life lacks concrete rewards, such as eternal life.

Case 2: Not good, could have been worse.

In World 1, the meaning of life is for our suffering to please a sadistic deity.
In World 2, nihilism is true.

Person A in World 1 and Person B in World 2 are doppelgängers living physically and psychologically identical lives of devout worship of a good deity that they think exists but does not exist in either world. A sadistic deity does exist in World 1, however, and She loves watching A suffer,

especially when the suffering is incurred in his acts of worship of the non-existent good deity, such as when he drags himself up the 583 steps of the Sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte on bleeding knees – the amusement this kind of suffering gives her was the main reason She created human life, and hence is its cosmic purpose.

In this case B's life is better, because it is better to be wasting your time than providing this kind of service to a sadistic deity. If both A and B were aware of their cosmic situation, A would have more reason to regret it than B, although you would expect B to regret it too, at least to some extent. Nevertheless, B has only lucked out in a trivial, counterfactual sense, the same sense in which I am lucky not to belong to a human race that has an average life expectancy of 40 years old, or one which experiences half as much pleasure when eating. However, both A and B have actually suffered from their false beliefs in a meaning of life. So once again, we see that believing in a meaning of life is risky, whereas believing in nihilism is not, because if you are wrong it cannot really matter to you – not unless it has deprived you of some cosmic reward, of course, but then nihilists do not think there are any of those.

Case 3: Does it matter?

In World 1, the meaning of life is for human pleasure to be maximised.

In World 2, nihilism is true.

Person A in World 1 and Person B in World 2 are doppelgängers living physically and psychologically identical lives of pure hedonism.

In Cases 1 and 2, believing in a meaning of life could be damaging to the value of your life, because you might be wasting your time if nihilism is true, or if you chose the wrong meaning. Looking back on a life of prayer in full knowledge that the deity you were praying to did not exist, although for your whole life you thought He did, most people would surely regret having wasted their time, at least to some extent; if they had their time again they would do something different. There might be some who would think their life of prayer was so wonderful that they did not regret it even though it was based on a false premise, but I think such people are rare; the kind who would not regret years spent with a lover they thought was faithful but who cheated obsessively. And that is just the penalty for

betting on a meaning of life when nihilism is true. The penalty for choosing the wrong meaning could be much worse, as in the sadistic deity scenario of Case 2.

Case 3 is different because it makes no difference to the value of your life even if you are wrong that hedonism is the meaning of life. Suppose persons A and B both think it is, they are true believers, so they put the maximum effort into their hedonistic pursuits. Person B went awry in her metaphysical speculations, however, because nihilism was true in her world, so did she miss out? Perhaps she could have spent her time more enjoyably praying and bird-watching, but to suppose this is to suppose she had no real enthusiasm for the hedonism, and that seems unrealistic when she genuinely believed she was trying to achieve the ultimate cosmic goal, the meaning of life. Whatever you think of hedonism as a lifestyle, it seems equally good, bad or neutral if it is the meaning of life as if it is not.

Now switch the example from hedonism to something more worthy, like contributing to the spread of justice, or wisdom, or knowledge, or beauty. The same argument applies. Persons A and B spend their lives in pursuit of beauty, say, they are great artist doppelgängers. Both thought the meaning of life was to create beauty, Person A was right but Person B was wrong, so Person's A's life was meaningful and Person B's life was meaningless. So what? Well, Person B's life made no contribution to the cosmic purpose of, for example, saturating the cosmos with beauty so that reality itself becomes the intelligible matter of The Form of Beauty. I see no reason for Person B to care about that: the cosmos counterfactually missed out, which is trivial, and the pursuit of beauty is a reasonable, and indeed admirable pursuit for a human being. As such, it makes no difference that she was wrong about the meaning of life. The pursuit of beauty is a good thing to do with your life anyway.

In so far as we are able to set overall goals for our lives, or believe there are such goals because we believe in a meaning of life, the most reasonable goals are those which would remain reasonable if nihilism turned out to be true. Hedonism, justice, knowledge, art, happiness, adventure, spirituality and love are likely to be key components of such goals. If we pursue goals like these, then we personally do not miss out if nihilism is true, only the cosmos misses out, in a trivial, counterfactual way. Such goals do not need the royal seal of approval from the cosmos. It is only when the meaning of life involves some secret, non-manifest reward or penalty that the possibility of nihilism, and of belief in nihilism, starts to matter. The possibility of nihilism then matters because the believer in a

meaning of life might be wasting their time, which could have been more gainfully employed had they correctly ascertained the nihilistic metaphysical situation. And believing in nihilism starts to matter when we consider meanings which might land nihilists in hell.

If you mould your life around a quest for non-manifest reward or penalty then it makes a big difference whether nihilism is true because you have chosen a risky lifestyle, given the extreme tendentiousness of the evidence for non-manifest rewards or penalties. If you take that risk and are wrong, then that is no good reason for a negative appraisal of nihilism, however – it was your false belief in a meaning of life that did you harm, not the truth of nihilism. If you were right and nihilists like me are heading to hell, then we are going to hell for believing something evaluatively neutral about the cosmos, which is some consolation. It is hard to imagine nihilists being quite that unlucky, however, given the extreme evidential tendentiousness. In fact, if the psychology of God bears any resemblance to that of humans, then I would think it far more likely that She, He or It would favour the humans who lived lives which would have been reasonable even if nihilism was true.

8. Nihilism and Eternal Life

If my reasoning is along the right lines and nihilism is indeed an evaluatively neutral metaphysical claim, then why has human history developed in such a way that it has almost always interpreted nihilism with extreme negativity? My hypothesis is because of the kind of meanings of life that have predominated in human history, namely those that promise an escape from death. Humans fear death, not just instinctively, as do other animals, but intellectually too – the idea of it disturbs us, and it takes some serious discipline in a philosophy such as Stoicism to overcome that; a far more common tactic, because far less demanding, is philosophical thoughtlessness.

If it is because of our fear of death, whether raw, ignored, or overcome, that believers in the kind of meaning of life that saves you from death think exceptionally highly of this meaning – for what could be more important to them? Imagine a superior being poses you the following dilemma: in one week's time you are going to die unless you write and then post ten thousand letters – if you do that, your life can continue as normal. Personally, I would drop everything and start writing and posting letters, as fast as I possibly could. Then imagine you

reach nine thousand letters and still have two days to go, you are very relieved to realise that you will easily make it. But as you are basking in relief while working on the remaining letters, the intelligence tells you it was only joking, since it is going to kill you at the end of the week anyway. That is what it would be like for a true believer in a lifesaving meaning of life to be told that nihilism is true.

No wonder nihilism has been evaluated negatively, then, for it has dashed false religious hope. Or, at least, I presume it is false hope. Even if it is not, however, nihilism is still only a neutral claim, because all it does is take life at face value. It does not set out to undermine people's hopes for eternal life, it just asserts what seems to be true if you take life at face value, namely that life ends when your body dies and consciousness ends, the two go together. The fact that people are primordially and viscerally afraid of death should make us maximally suspicious of any reasoning that purports to show that, appearances to the contrary, we actually live forever. Those who earnestly tell you that you can live forever like to include a set of instructions on how you must live to earn this ultimate reward. Personally, I would rather be a nihilist and live the way I think best.

9. Conclusions

- 1) Negative nihilism is inspired by fear of death. If what you want more than anything is to believe that living in manner X will earn you eternal life, then the thought of nihilism will fill you with despair. If you have never thought about it much, then you will take it for granted that nihilism is terrible because that is its historical reputation.
- 2) Although nihilism is neutral, it may seem good or bad to you, depending on which false views about the meaning of life it has disabused you of.
- 3) Unless the meaning of life involves a reward or penalty in addition to the manifest, face-value rewards and penalties which a human being can reasonably expect for living one way or another, then the presence or absence of a meaning of life is a matter for personal indifference.
- 4) Philosophers theorising about nihilism should work with the neutral kind unless they know how to overcome the arguments in this paper. Otherwise, they will be theorising about a straw man, because in the realm of nihilism there is only one real contender – Neutral Nihilism is the one to beat if you are a believer in the meaning of life.

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Pessimism and the Tragedy of Strong Attachments

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Abstract

Pessimists hold that human life is fundamentally a condition of suffering which cannot attain transcendent meaning. According to pessimistic nihilism, life's lack of transcendent meaning gives us reason to regret our existence. Life-affirming nihilism insists that we can and should affirm life in the absence of transcendent meaning. Yet both of these strains struggle to articulate what practical reasons might compel us to regret *or* affirm our inability to transcend the immanent conditions of the human predicament in the first place. I suggest that we catch sight of these practical reasons when we shift our attention from the value of transcendent *meaning* to the desire for temporal transcendence expressed by *strong attachments* such as love and devotion. In short, we want the things we love to last forever, and they can't. This makes human life tragic, but it does not settle the question of what sort of meaning it might have or lack.

1. Introduction: From Meaning to Attachment

Can human life be happy? Does life have a meaning sufficient to redeem our sufferings? Is it a good thing for me that I was born? Many people, if they think about these questions at all, are likely to think that the answer to all three is “yes,” perhaps obviously so. Some might even think it downright immoral to think otherwise. Yet for those of us who have a sneaking suspicion that the answer to at least one of these questions might be “no,” philosophical pessimism provides a more sympathetic tradition of interlocutors. That tradition is centrally concerned with the value of existence, and is open to the possibility that existing might be a very bad thing indeed.

Pessimism claims that life is unsatisfactory because it is pervasively marked by *suffering*, or because it is *meaningless* (or possibly both). As Frederick Beiser explains in his study of pessimism in 19th-century Germany,

Life was held to be not worth living either for *eudemonic* reasons, i.e. because it is filled with more suffering than happiness, or for *idealistic* reasons, i.e. because we cannot achieve, or even progress toward, those

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moral, political or aesthetic ideals that give our lives meaning. Clearly, these rationales are distinct: someone might think that, even though life is filled with suffering, it is still worth living because we make progress toward our ideals. Some pessimists ... would combine both rationales; others, however, would carefully distinguish between them, holding one rather than the other.¹

It is not surprising that the question of meaning has been so central within the pessimist tradition, since our sense of what kind of meaning life has or lacks can influence our evaluation of life as a whole. A sufficiently meaningful life might be worth living even if it is fundamentally and pervasively marked by suffering and unhappiness. If we are aware that a great deal of life consists of suffering, and if we are concerned with the question of whether life is worth living, it seems especially important to determine the extent to which our lives can have meaning.

There is considerable disagreement within the pessimist tradition of what sort of meaning life would need to achieve in order to be worthwhile. One tendency, which I will call “pessimistic nihilism,” holds that in addition to being a condition of appalling suffering, human life lacks any form of meaning that would make it worthwhile. It is thus reasonable to regret coming into existence. The second tendency, which I will call “life-affirming nihilism,” acknowledges that while life may certainly be a condition of suffering and unhappiness, our lives can nevertheless achieve meaning through a form of striving which creates new ideals and types of value, discovers new ways of exerting power and increasing our agency, and ultimately allows us to affirm a birth we never asked for.

It is nowadays common to draw a distinction between the concept of a “meaning of life” and the concept of “meaning in life.” Debates about the meaning *of* life focus on the question of whether life as a whole has a point, whether life is significant in “the grand scheme of things,” or whether there is an ultimate purpose that life serves. Debates about meaning *in* life focus on the question of whether and how life can include a distinctive kind of value (“meaningfulness”) which gives us practical reasons to endure suffering, devote ourselves to religious or political causes, undertake projects or relationships, and so on. Even if there is no cosmic purpose that our lives serve, no good reason for us to come into

¹ Beiser (2016), pp. 4-5.

existence, and no point to our lives as a whole, it may be possible to lead more or less “meaningful” lives.

Ultimately, both pessimistic and life-affirming nihilism concur that there is no “meaning of life” (or at least no type of meaning that would redeem or compensate for our sufferings).² More precisely, there are no *transcendent* sources of meaning available to human beings: whatever meaning our lives can have must be realized on the earthly terrestrial plane. However, these forms of nihilism differ on the significance of this fact for human life. Pessimistic nihilism argues that our inability to access transcendent sources of meaning shows 1) that life does not have a kind of meaning sufficient to redeem our sufferings and thus 2) that we should regret the fact that our lives lack transcendent meanings. Life-affirming nihilism insists that a lack of transcendent meaning is nothing to be regretted – in fact, focusing on transcendent meaning separates us from the project of criticizing, re-evaluating, and re-creating the sources of meaning that govern our lives on the terrestrial plane (precisely the activities which might ground a “meaningful life”).

Yet both parties to this debate stumble over a simple but important question: what reasons do these arguments give *us* to regret or affirm a lack of transcendent meaning in our lives? Pessimistic nihilism regrets the unattainability of a type of transcendent meaning which the vast majority of us simply do not seem to care for. Life-affirming nihilism, on the other hand, too often denies the relevance of transcendent value to human flourishing altogether. Illuminating a middle way in this debate requires us to show that most of us are *already implicitly committed to affirming* the value of a kind of transcendence in our daily lives which, regrettably, we cannot achieve. I argue that there is evidence of this implicit commitment in our *strong attachments*, especially those on display in our concerned, loving, caring, and radically vulnerable attachments to other people.

Section 2 gives a more precise characterization of pessimistic nihilism and life-affirming nihilism and their disagreement over the importance of transcendent meaning. There we will see that the problem of rational authority gives us a reason to seek a middle way between pessimistic nihilism’s longing for certain kinds of transcendence and life-affirming nihilism’s rejection of those

² The qualification is important because Schopenhauer (who I consider a pessimistic nihilist) often remarks that suffering is the *point* of our existence, and that human life resembles the progressive working off of a debt we incur by being born (albeit a debt inherited in a godless, indifferent universe in which there is no cosmic order or intelligence to which we are indebted). Thus there is a sense in which Schopenhauer’s universe realizes a dark “meaning of life,” even if it is one which does not give us much consolation. Thanks to Michael Hauskeller for pointing this out.

types of transcendence. Section 3 introduces the core notion of “strong attachment,” and argues that the unsatisfiability of our strong attachments renders life tragic. Additionally, we distinguish “the tragic” from the closely related notion of “the absurd,” and show that the problems that each poses for life are distinct. Section 4 argues that the centrality of strong attachments in different philosophical traditions suggests that they are a central feature of human psychology and practical agency. Section 5 concludes with a brief speculation: strong attachments are the clearest manifestation of a more general tragic tension between the demands of wisdom and the demands of love.

2. Two Tendencies in Pessimism

Modern pessimism grew out of the decline of Christian monotheism and theodicy, which for centuries in Europe had served as the reigning philosophical framework for grappling with the world’s manifest horrors. Under the influence of Schopenhauer, pessimism emerged as a form of “Protestantism without theism” which affirmed the bleakest descriptions of human suffering in the Christian tradition while excising God, natural teleology, and other transcendent values from its ontology.³ Pessimistic nihilism is “nihilistic” insofar as it denies that the sources that would actually give human life sufficient meaning (can) actually exist, and it is “pessimistic” insofar as it suggests that this fact (among others) should lead us to regret our existence. Pessimistic nihilism can perhaps be best summed-up by a counterfactual lamentation: transcendent values might indeed have given our lives a form of meaning that would make existence worthwhile – what a pity, therefore, that no such values exist.

Pessimistic nihilists differ in their understanding of what sort of transcendent meaning human life lacks. Yet in each case, there is an assertion that any value which *could* conceivably confer a point upon, grant significance to, justify, compensate for, or redeem the struggles of human lives would have to lie beyond human earthly experience and idealized human capacities. Again, the transcendent values of a religious ontology would count as sources of transcendent meaning by this definition.

Yet the class of transcendent meanings can also include more “secular” values which are inaccessible to us due to non-negotiable psychological, logical, or

³ Beiser (2016).

physical constraints on human life. For example, Rivka Weinberg has recently argued that while the value of our everyday activities can be articulated in terms of the valued ends or “points” they have, our lives as a whole cannot have a point which would justify the entire enterprise, insofar as it is impossible for there to be a valued end “external” to the life as a whole. Activities within life can have points (and therefore, justifications for engaging in them) while life as a whole is pointless. This fact should make us “very, very sad.”⁴

Similarly, David Benatar claims that we should regret that our lives lack “cosmic meaning.”⁵ For Benatar, human lives can appear significant, important, and purpose-serving in various ways, from various perspectives. Yet all lives are meaningless from a *cosmic* perspective. Our limitations in space and time and the fact that “we serve no purpose in the cosmos” means that nothing we do can have any significance “from the perspective of the cosmos.” It is as if we never existed at all. While it is certainly good that our lives can realize forms of meaningfulness from more local perspectives, “we are nonetheless warranted in regretting our cosmic insignificance and the pointlessness of the entire human endeavor...”⁶

Life-affirming nihilists concur with pessimistic nihilists that human life cannot realize transcendent meanings. Yet they do not see this as cause for regret, and deny that this fact supports a negative evaluation of human life as a whole. While Friedrich Nietzsche frequently identified himself as a kind of pessimist, Schopenhauer’s pessimism and its paradoxical ethics of resignation and compassion ultimately struck him as a moralistic holdover from Christianity and its ultimate metaphysical roots: the Platonic demarcation of the realms of Being and Becoming, in which The Good, The True, and The Beautiful is consigned to an eternal realm “beyond” the flux of earthly life altogether.

Nietzsche’s life-affirming nihilism rejects the idea that true value can only come from permanent, changeless, and transcendent sources. In place of the withdrawing ascetic who pines after the “other world,” Nietzsche champions the “high-spirited world-affirming human being” who is strong enough to will their life exactly as it is over and over again:

Whoever has endeavored with some enigmatic longing... to think pessimism through to its depths and to liberate it from the half-Christian,

⁴ Weinberg (2021).

⁵ Benatar (2017).

⁶ Benatar (2017), pp. 62-63.

half-German narrowness and simplicity in which it is finally presented itself to our century, namely, in the form of Schopenhauer's philosophy ... may just thereby, without meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity..."⁷

Certainly, Nietzsche's life-affirming perspective emphasizes *self*-transcendence, or a creative striving against the contingent limits self-imposed and imposed upon us by "morality," "religion," "nature," or "social custom." Perhaps that self can be strong enough to be the source of its own value, and out of its strength would not wish anything to be different than what it is, forever.

Pessimistic nihilism and life-affirming nihilism thus agree on the absence of transcendent meaning, but recommend very different attitudes toward that fact. What attitude should *we* have, if we are convinced that human life has no transcendent meaning? Here pessimism encounters a more general problem in normative theory, the problem of *rational authority*. This is the problem of explaining how a normative theory gives agents practical reasons to think, feel, and act in the ways that theory recommends. For example, act utilitarianism instructs me to perform those actions that maximize aggregate utility, on the grounds that aggregate utility is the most important good. Yet if I am not already inclined to treat aggregate utility as the most important good, it may be unclear to me just why I should act like an act utilitarian. It is then incumbent upon the act utilitarian to supply me with practical reasons to maximize aggregate utility. Similarly, a pessimistic (/life-affirming) nihilist might tell me that my life has or does not have meaning in a certain respect, and that I should regret (/affirm) that fact. But if I don't already recognize the rational authority of that form of pessimism, it must provide me with practical reasons to follow its prescriptions.

Part of the difficulty of the problem of rational authority is that one temperament might see practical reasons for regret or affirmation where another does not. Pessimistic nihilism might seem to set the bar for meaning "too high" because it requires life to have "more" meaning or a loftier kind of meaning than that interpreter cares to have. To others, it might seem that life-affirming nihilism

⁷ Nietzsche (1886), section 56.

sets the bar “too low” because it suggests that we have no reason to regret that our lives fail to have transcendent meaning.

One way of addressing the problem of rational authority is to demonstrate that we are *already practically committed* to acting in the way a theory recommends. Why should I care about aggregate happiness? A utilitarian might try to demonstrate that we already are practically committed to producing aggregate happiness on the basis that each of us is practically committed to her own happiness, and that securing our own happiness requires caring about the happiness of others as well. Why should I care whether or not life has transcendent meaning? Well, perhaps we are already somehow practically committed to achieving transcendent meanings, and so it would be rational to regret that life lacks them.

But *are* most of us committed to achieving transcendent meanings? Certainly, the fact that our lives lack certain *types* of transcendent meaning might be a matter of indifference to many of us. Personally, it is hard for me to regret that my life literally does not have a “point” in Weinberg’s technical sense, or to share Benatar’s disappointment that life will never realize “cosmic meaning.” Perhaps others are just as sure that they *do* crave these things, or some other form of transcendent meaning.

Yet ultimately, even if we could show that life lacks a kind of transcendent meaning that all human beings desperately crave, this might not settle the question of whether that lack of meaning is a *problem for life*. This is ultimately the point Nietzsche is driving at when he accuses Schopenhauer’s pessimism of a kind of performative contradiction. Despite describing the suffering and pointlessness of the world in some of the strongest and darkest terms possible, Schopenhauer goes on to defend an ethics of compassion that owes much to the Christian tradition that he (and Nietzsche) claimed to despise. Even worse, Nietzsche sneers, Schopenhauer would play *the flute*:

Schopenhauer, pessimism notwithstanding, actually – played the flute ... every day, after dinner. You can read it in his biography. And just out of curiosity: a pessimist who negates both God and world but stops before morality, – who affirms a harm-no-one morality and plays his flute: excuse me? is this really – a pessimist?⁸

⁸ Nietzsche (1886), section 186.

The fact that Schopenhauer's philosophy of resignation did not undercut the philosopher's ethical and musical commitments reflects a truth about human agency that Nietzsche (but not Schopenhauer) was in a position to grasp: however we might evaluate life as a whole, we *live*, and living requires doing things that *affirm life* – valuing things, striving towards goals, improving ourselves, etc. In short, “the ‘pessimist’ will reveal their carefully concealed cheerful, life-affirming spirit as soon as they start to try to accomplish something.”⁹

To this extent, Nietzsche charges Schopenhauer with something like the problem of rational authority: if the lack of transcendent meaning is truly a *problem* for human life, why does it not seem to have much effect on our practical reasons for doing things even when we know that life lacks that kind of meaning? A life-affirming nihilism which does not see the lack of transcendent meaning as a problem for life would thus seem to enjoy some degree of confirmation over its pessimistic cousin.

Nietzsche challenges us to specify the connection between an unsatisfiable desire for transcendence and the problem of life. The challenge generalizes: why is it a problem that our lives are pointless or lack cosmic meaning? I confess that I am rather sympathetic with the life-affirming nihilist's idea that a lack of transcendent meaning does not necessarily mar life's value. At the same time, a lack of transcendent *meaning* may not be the only lack of transcendence that may pose a problem for human life. If we generally have unfulfillable desires for other forms of transcendence, perhaps our situation is a tragic one that warrants an attitude of regret. I think we do have such desires, and that they are revealed in our strong attachments.

3. Strong Attachments, Transcendence, and the Tragic

One lesson from Nietzsche's swipe at Schopenhauer's flute playing is that no matter how bleak our outlook on life may be, we are creatures who make plans, take up projects, and strive after goals. Practical agency requires attachment – a sense that my own well-being is bound up with how things are going with people, projects, relationships, and things which somehow “involve” me but which nevertheless maintain a degree of independent existence from me. The objects of

⁹ Smyth (2022), p. 67.

our attachments give us reasons to live, and these objects can seem worth pursuing and central to our conception of what matters in life even when we acknowledge their transience, fragility, and arbitrariness.

Strong attachments make much more stringent demands on the objects of attachment. In strong attachment, our knowledge of the transience and fragility of the object of attachment directly clashes with a strong (possibly unconscious) desire for the object of our attachment to last. Strong attachments thus involve a desire for *temporal* transcendence. We want the things we love to last forever (or at least for much longer than we know they can last), and they can't. This makes human life *tragic*, and to an extent regrettable, but it does not settle the question of what sort of *meaning* it might have (or lack). Or so I will argue.

Let's begin by characterizing strong attachments a bit more precisely:

Strong attachments:¹⁰

- i) provide us with non-instrumental reasons to look after the well-being or preservation of the object of the attachment for its own sake.
- ii) involve prolonged, active engagement with the object of attachment.
- iii) provide a source of authoritative prudential and instrumental reasons that we take into account in deliberating about "how to live" in a broad sense.
- iv) render us emotionally vulnerable to the decline or loss of the object of our attachment.
- v) involve a belief that the object of our attachment plays a central role in our own well-being.
- vi) involve a belief that the object of our attachment is irreplaceable.
- vii) involve a deep desire for the objects of our attachments to last forever, indefinitely, or much longer than we know they can last.

Three features of strong attachments are worth emphasizing. First, while I leave open the possibility that we can be strongly attached to objects such as social practices, treasured heirlooms, geographical features, or political ideals, I take it

¹⁰ My conception of "strong attachments" has points of overlap with Monique Wonderly's (2016) definition of "security-based attachment" (particularly conditions iv) and vi)) as well as Matthew Dennis' (2020) conception of "passionate attachments" (particularly conditions ii) and iii.) Condition vii) is unique to the category of "strong attachment."

that most strong attachments are between *welfare subjects*, or beings capable of achieving well-being (e.g. a ring that is handed down as a treasured family heirloom can degrade in quality over time, and that might be highly consequential for me, but that is a matter of indifference to *it* – or at least many of us think so).¹¹

Second, strong attachments are incompatible with forms of attachment that are indifferent to or inimical to the well-being of the objects to which we are attached (such as obsession or severe hatred). Putting these together, we can see that strong attachments are most readily revealed in close friendships, intimate relationships, and parental and filial love.

Finally, we may, but need not, desire *personal* immortality in order to be strongly attached.¹² Indeed, in many cases we are strongly attached to things that we know or hope will survive our own deaths. This is the lesson of Samuel Scheffler’s “Doomsday Scenario,”¹³ in which we learn that 30 days after our own death, a sudden catastrophic event will bring about the extinction of the human race. Even though we would be spared the monumental suffering that would be associated with the catastrophe, most of us would react to this possibility with horror rather than indifference. This, Scheffler thinks, indicates 1) that we value many things independently of their ability to sensibly affect us, 2) that the importance we place on many of the things we value is conditional on the assumption that these things will continue to exist in the future, *even if we will not*. For example, much of the value we currently see in political activism, the pursuit of scientific discovery, or artistic achievement, rests on the assumption that there will be some *future* to which our activism, knowledge, or achievement makes a contribution. We want many of the things we care about to go on without

¹¹ Animist worldviews will likely have a more inclusive sense of “welfare subject” than non-animist worldviews. Consider also the phenomenon of “object sexuality,” in which people experience romantic and sexual attraction to “inanimate” objects such as a specific roller coaster or the Eiffel Tower. OS individuals often believe that the objects of their affection communicate, reciprocate their love, and can be positively or negatively affected by the relationship. By my definition, OS individuals can be strongly attached to these beloved objects regardless of whether or not those objects are “animate” or truly count as welfare subjects.

¹² When we die, so do our attachment relations themselves, since the basic *psychological* conditions needed for the above 7 conditions to apply to us are no longer satisfied (assuming there is no form of consciousness after death). Yet the *logical* conditions of the desire specified in condition 7 can be satisfied without requiring us to be immortal. As we will see, I think that as a matter of fact most of us are strongly attached to things that simply cannot last, and thus that the desire specified by condition 7 is almost always unsatisfied. This does leave logical space open for psychologically implausible cases in which a mortal person has a strong attachment to perpetual processes that will continue for eternity “without them,” such as the continual expansion of the universe.

¹³ Scheffler (2013).

us. The assumption that they will is part of the explanation for why we value them *now*.

What is the problem that strong attachments pose for life? In short, strong attachments give us practical reasons to live and organize our lives in particular ways. Yet the transience and fragility of the object of attachment (the ultimate source of these practical reasons) is doubly threatening. First, it is threatening because it guarantees the eventual loss, decline, or death of the beloved object, whose well-being we care about for its own sake. Second, it is threatening to *our* sense of who and what we are and how we “fit in” in the world. Strong attachments make us vulnerable. Losing the objects of our strong attachments, can threaten our practical identities and our sense of existential and psychological integrity.

Consider an example. Mohamed is a loving father strongly attached to his son. He is very much aware that his son will someday die (long after he himself does, he hopes), but the idea of his son’s ultimate mortality is a complicated piece of knowledge for him. How could the love he has for his son – a love that is irreplaceable, singular, unreplicable in all of human history, so central to his daily responses, feelings, and ideas of how to live, capable of organizing everything in the world in its proper place, giving him a sense of who and what and where he is – be based in a relationship between two finite, fragile beings that an indifferent universe will treat as utterly unimportant? “Heaven and earth are ruthless,” Lao Tzu proclaims in the *Tao Te Ching*, “and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.” Maybe so, but can I really accept that *my child* is merely a straw dog from the point of view of the universe? The thought itself is challenging because it represents a contradiction between the intense claim to value that strong attachments make on parts of the universe (and the practical identities we form on the basis of those attachments) and the lack of value that the universe seems to place on that attachment. This in turn is the basis of a *tragic* tension in human life.

Tragedy often unfolds by way of a contradiction between a character’s *aspiration* to a certain goal or station and that same character’s *real* personal and contextual circumstances. In tragedy, the real threatens to undermine the aspiration and succeeds. Here the real can come in the form of a protagonist’s tragic flaw, the inalterable course of fate, or a horrific contingency that undoes the best-laid plans. The sense of the tragic is partially constituted by our recognition

of (and perhaps identification with) the regret and anguish that this clash between aspiration and reality warrants.

Conceiving of the tragic in this way invites comparison and contrast with Thomas Nagel's influential analysis of "the absurd." Nagel uses the language of "aspiration" and "reality" to describe "the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt."¹⁴ We stress over many aspects of our lives: our jobs, our relationships, our appearance, our decisions, our social identities and status. Most of the time, the question of the importance of these things does not arise for us. They "automatically" give us practical reasons to pursue them. And yet when we step back into the more abstract, third-personal view, we notice that the importance we claim for these activities cannot be grounded in any suitably "objective" point of view that would vindicate these claims to significance:

We step back to find that the whole system of justification and criticism, which controls our choices and supports our claims to rationality, rests on responses and habits that we never question, that we should not know how to defend without circularity, and to which we shall continue to adhere even after they are called into question.¹⁵

Nagel thinks that this ability to "step back" is unlimited – even the overarching systems that anchor our sense of "the meaning of life" can be questioned:

If we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point, we can step back also from the progress of human history, or of science, or the success of a society, or the kingdom, power, and glory of God, and put all these things into question in the same way. What seems to us to confer meaning, justification, significance, does so in virtue of the fact that we need no more reasons after a certain point.

If our lives are absurd, they are so because of a tension between the seriousness and significance we claim for our lives, our ability to see those same lives as unserious and insignificant, and our inability to provide a subject-independent

¹⁴ Nagel (1971), p. 718.

¹⁵ Nagel (1971), p. 720.

“view from nowhere” from which our claims to our lives’ seriousness and significance can be decisively vindicated once and for all time. To this extent, “the absurd” results from an irresolvable tension in human consciousness, and one that we cope with by getting to a point where we more or less arbitrarily decide that “we need no more reasons” to engage with our lives.

“The absurd” and “the tragic” both involve an irresolvable tension in human life having to do with the gap between aspiration and reality. Moreover, the feature that makes life “absurd” or “tragic” is in each case a subjective feature – the feeling or sense that life is absurd (or tragic) is part of what *makes it the case* that life is absurd (or tragic). A creature that cannot appreciate or notice the clash between aspiration and reality cannot live an absurd or tragic life (Nagel’s example: the life of a mouse cannot be absurd, since a mouse cannot care about the ultimate rational justification of its mouselike pursuits).

Yet it is important to underline a few differences as well. Most centrally, the clash between aspiration and reality in Nagel’s absurd arises from a search for a kind of *rational* justification we cannot have, but which our consciousness nevertheless asks for. In the tragic, what is at stake is not rational justification, but the *permanent satisfaction of a desire* which we “know” is unattainable – and yet our desire still asks for that form of satisfaction. The question “what’s the point of this?” is not precisely the same as the question as “(why) must this end?” To this extent, the experience of the tragic arises “within” Nagel’s lived first-person perspective. It does not ask for the ultimate reasons which might justify its pursuit, since those reasons have already been settled by the strength of our strong attachments. We do not ask about the *point* of our desire (since the desire itself strikes us as so obviously, viscerally important) so much as we lament its unsatisfiability.

But more generally, the problem that strong attachments pose for life is not that they present us with a crisis of *meaning*. The fact that we know that the objects of our strong attachments will not last forever does not undercut our sense of their importance or value. On the contrary, there is a sense in which the transience and fragility of the objects of our strong attachments *underline* their importance for us. For example, it would be very strange if Mohamed’s anguished knowledge of his child’s finitude and fragility were to lead him to regard his strong attachment as somehow insignificant, arbitrary, or not ultimately “worth it.” That seems to give the “perspective of the universe” too much deference – the objects of my strong attachments matter to me *despite* what the universe has to say about their

value. The feeling of absurdity is not the feeling that arises for the person confronting the transience and fragility of their strong attachments.

Nevertheless, when considered as a feeling arising from a fundamental aspect of the human condition, the absurd and the tragic might be similarly irresolvable. In *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* Miguel de Unamuno claimed that the tragic is generated by a contradiction between the demands of Reason and the demands of Life. Reason supplies us with the “knowledge” that we will die “utterly,” while Life endows us with the “longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the striving to persevere indefinitely in our own being.”¹⁶ For Unamuno, the satisfaction of Reason’s demand is fundamentally incompatible with the satisfaction of Life’s demand. A similar thought is expressed in Tolstoy’s famous narration of Ivan Ilyich’s thoughts as he gradually comes to realize that he is lying on his deathbed:

The example of a syllogism he had studied in Kiesewetter’s logic – Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal-had seemed to him all his life to be correct only in relation to Caius, but by no means to himself. For the man Caius, man in general, it was perfectly correct; but he was not Caius and not man in general, he had always been quite, quite separate from all other beings; he was Vanya, with mama, with papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with toys, the coachman, with a nanny, then With Katenka, with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, youth. Was it for Caius, the smell of the striped leather ball – that Vanya had loved so much? Was it Caius who had kissed his mother’s hand like that, and was it for Caius that the silk folds of his mother’s dress had rustled like that? Was it he who had mutinied against bad food in law school? Was it Caius who had been in love like that? Was it Caius who could conduct a court session like that? And Caius is indeed mortal, and it’s right that he die, but for me, Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all my feelings and thoughts-for me it’s another matter. And it cannot be that I should die. It would be too terrible.¹⁷

Ivan Ilyich’s anxiety does not seem to arise from the sense that his life is absurd, or lacking in ultimate justification “from the perspective of the cosmos.” Rather, it arises from an inability to reconcile what Reason and Life demand. Of course,

¹⁶ Unamuno (1912), p. 42.

¹⁷ Tolstoy (1886), p. 70.

Ivan Ilyich has always *known* that he is mortal, and that he is not exempt from the logic of the syllogism. Yet that knowledge is of no help in grappling with the reality of his own impending death. There is a seed of contradiction in his thoughts: “I knew the rules applied to me, but I didn’t know they applied to *me!*” After all, everyone else bound by the rule is not *him*, with his particular experiences, memories, relationships, passions, struggles – and yet here he is, it seems, a straw dog like the rest. “I couldn’t possibly be a straw dog! Could a straw dog have lived a life like *this?*” Reason says yes. Life says no. And what could possibly resolve such a contradiction?

4. Strong Attachments as a Feature of Human Psychology

My argument has been that strong attachments involve a desire for a valuable kind of transcendence which (I believe) is ultimately unavailable to human beings. This means that life is generally a tragic prospect, and we have good reasons to regret that these are the constraints of our predicament. Yet this does not presume an answer to the question of what sort of *meaning* human life has. Life might be tragic and meaningful, or tragic and meaningless. Either way, strong attachments represent a problem for life.

Of course, this falls well short of *proof* that life is tragic. First, one could recognize the power of strong attachments but deny that they always involve an unsatisfiable desire. For example, if there is an afterlife in which human desires for transcendence can be completely fulfilled in perpetuity, our situation is less tragic. Second, one could acknowledge that our strong attachments involve unsatisfiable desires, but deny that this constitutes a *tragic* tension worth regretting. Why give in to regret when we could approach this situation with acceptance, or even humor?

Certainly, we should grant that there are many ways of posing the challenge that strong attachments pose to life (if they pose one at all). The problem I have focused on in this paper emerges from a debate within the pessimist tradition about the value of transcendence. Those who do not share the background assumptions of that debate are likely to draw different conclusions about whether and to what extent strong attachments are a problem.

The claim most threatening to my argument, however, is that strong attachments are simply not a widespread feature of human psychology. If the vast majority of us do not have strong attachments, then most of us lack a necessary

condition for experiencing our lives as tragic in the particular sense I have outlined here. We would therefore also lack practical reasons to regret this putatively tragic feature of our predicament. Recall that the problem of rational authority pushes us to root the sense of life's tragedy and the practical reasons we have to regret our predicament in a widely shared and universally frustrated desire for transcendence. Discovering that strong attachments exist only in a possibly pathological minority of individuals would seriously hamper that attempt.

Admittedly, the claim that strong attachments are a widespread feature of human psychology is at least partly empirical in nature, and I have no empirical evidence to offer. Instead, I'll close with a more indirect reason to believe it: philosophical traditions at all times and places have been centrally devoted to the question of how to navigate strong attachments. The examples I point to are intentionally drawn from outside the modern European context to suggest a degree of cross-cultural stability to the type of attachment I mean to describe.

First, consider American Indian thought. The anthropologist Paul Radin claimed that the "tragic sense of life" was a noticeable current in the philosophical discourse of the Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) tribe in Wisconsin, among whom he did his doctoral fieldwork. Radin claimed that the Winnebago acknowledged a conceptual distinction between "tragedy," in which accidental circumstances conspire to undo us, and "doom," meaning "more specifically the inevitable tragedy arising from the expression of strong ambitions, feelings, and desires, which, though easily explicable, bring only ruin in their train."¹⁸ Stories of doom counsel against overstepping the bounds appropriate to human life, and to avoid "the sin" of "attempting to attain something which is beyond human power."¹⁹ Strong attachments appear to be a central way in which human beings can overstep their proper bounds:

[Doom arises from] the ceaseless conflict and strife, within each man, of his own passions, desires, and ambitions. More particularly is it ascribed to that irresistible craving which exacts from man and the world more than he is entitled to and more than his abilities and powers warrant – more, in fact, than he can adequately hope to cope with. The resulting tragedy ... is the price to be paid for any deviation from that fundamental sense of reality

¹⁸ Radin 1957, p. 175.

¹⁹ Radin 1957, pp. 176-177.

which ordains ... that an old man may not enjoy what is the prerogative of youth nor a youth hope to escape death.²⁰

It is fair to wonder whether Radin – a Polish-born Jewish-American anthropologist writing in the first half of the 20th century who explicitly references Unamuno’s “tragic sense of life” in articulating his observations – is filtering his conversations with the Winnebago people through his own intellectual and cultural matrix. Yet Native scholars have also attested that the theme of strong, undisciplined desire or attachment leading to harmful overstep and eventual ruin appears repeatedly in American Indian thought. For example, there is the figure of the *Wiindigo* – “the cannibal monster of Anishinaabe legend that ‘symbolizes the potentially addictive part of the human condition – when certain desires are indulged,’ stimulating ‘more indulgence until all reason and control are lost’”²¹ – as well as the Lakota conception of *Wasi’chu*, a word which literally means “greedy one who takes the fat,” but which also refers to “white people,” and “a human condition based on greed, inhumanity, and exploitation” which emerges from the brutal, undisciplined, violent desires of settler colonialism.²²

Second, strong attachments are clearly recognized by the Buddhist tradition, insofar as they are one of the forms of “desire” or “craving” that lie at the root of suffering (*dukkha*). In our ignorance we become attached to things which are impermanent and which therefore cannot satisfy the expectations our attachments place upon them. For those of us who remain in ignorance, this impermanence of all things is a condition of suffering. Our strong attachments might be directed toward “external” objects, but we can also be strongly attached to *ourselves*. This is particularly emphasized by the “no-self” (*anatman*) view in Mahayana Buddhism, in which our sufferings are generated by a tension between the illusion of substantial, essential “own-being” of the self on the one hand, and the reality of a world in constant flux in which nothing has “own-being” on the other. What keeps us returning again and again to the unsatisfactoriness of samsara is our cherished illusion that there is a permanent and changeless “essence” to ourselves, our desires, and the objects of our desires. Liberation from samsara consists partially in the realization of the impermanence of all things, including the self,

²⁰ Radin (1957), p. 175.

²¹ Simpson (2011), p. 70; Laduke and Cowen (2020), p. 244.

²² Johansen and Maestas (1979).

and the attendant cessation of desire. Not only does the assumption of stability and permanence provide an explanation of how desires (and particularly strong attachments) lead us into suffering, but it also anchors the source of those desires. Our ignorant perception of an ultimately illusory substantial “self” must give way to an enlightened perception of an insubstantial, processual, and impermanent “no-self.”²³

Finally, the ethical core of Stoicism arises in part from its acknowledgment of the distorting influences of strong attachments. These prevent us from cultivating the disciplined perception, judgment, and will necessary for living in accordance with the developments of a rationally ordered world in which everything is ordained by the *logos*. “If you wish your children, and your wife, and your friends to live forever,” Epictetus claims, “you are stupid” (EN Chapter 14). Perhaps he is right. Yet it would be puzzling to find this declaration in the *Enchiridion* (a general “handbook” for the reader who seeks to live according to Stoic principles) if Epictetus didn’t think he was speaking about a relatively widespread feature of human psychology. Several chapters of the *Enchiridion* are devoted to advice for keeping (strong) attachments at bay:

Concerning each one of the things that give you delight, or are useful, or that you love, remember to think about what kind of thing it is, beginning from the least. If you love a ceramic cup, [say] “I love a cup.” Then if it breaks you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your own child or wife, [say] that you kiss a human. Then when they die you will not be disturbed.²⁴

Cups break, human beings die, and all of this is out of our control. The message is clear: suffering comes from our failure to draw the distinction between what we can and cannot control, and our undisciplined desire to control what is not up to us. From the point of view of a Stoic, strong attachments surely represent a particularly egregious failure to draw the line in the proper place.

5. W(h)ither Strong Attachments?

This brief survey of strong attachments across philosophical traditions is enough to indicate that they cannot simply be dismissed as pathological desires

²³ Gowans (2003).

²⁴ Epictetus (1983), chapter 3. Translation from Hogg (2014), p. 99.

shared by idiosyncratic individuals. On the contrary, the ethical prescriptions of American Indian, Buddhist, and Stoic thought each recognize the ways in which an unsatisfiable desire for transcendence (and particularly, the permanence of the things we love) can mar the quality of human life. Indeed, strong attachments seem to be a central cause of suffering in all three traditions – they may be dangerous, distorting, or even stupid, but they are certainly not abnormal.

I myself do not have a general prescription to share concerning how we should navigate the problem that strong attachments pose for life. My view does imply that if we want to avoid living tragic lives, one thing we should do is avoid having strong attachments. Should we avoid them? Regardless of how we answer this question, the problem of the tragic has a tendency to restate itself. Certainly, as American Indian, Buddhist, and Stoic traditions indicate, there is value in cultivating the discipline required to avoid the anguish of an irresolvable contradiction between what we want and what we can have. And yet again, to say that a contradiction between Reason and Life can be *avoided* is not to say that it can be *solved*.

Perhaps avoidance of the tension is the best we can hope for. Yet for those of us who experience our strong attachments as the best part of an unfortunate situation, avoidance may be neither possible nor desirable. Here, as elsewhere, the pessimist tradition is illuminating: as fragile, limited, attached creatures in a universe devoid of transcendent value, it may be that living requires us to choose between the demands of wisdom and the demands of love. And that could be the most tragic situation of all.

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The Void of Meaningful Activity after Completion

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Abstract

This paper explores the absence of meaningful activity, a topic not commonly addressed, as most of the philosophical literature on meaning in life focuses on meaningful and meaningless activities. I demonstrate the significant role of this absence, which is particularly evident after the completion of activities one previously engaged in with the expectation that they would be meaningful. A void of activity then emerges. By examining situations in the work of John Stuart Mill and Leo Tolstoy, I illustrate how such an absence helps us to understand the characteristic kind of negative feelings that these two figures report about meaning in life. I thus clarify how we should understand, evaluate and feel about situations involving the absence of meaningful activity. I also suggest that emphasising this absence leads to a broader view of life's meaning.

1. Introduction

This paper does not focus on meaningful activities or meaningless activities. Both are common topics in the philosophical literature on meaning in life, as they attempt to identify the conditions that make activities meaningful. Rather, my focus lies elsewhere: I concentrate here on the *absence* of meaningful activity. This absence plays a significant role in life. We often find it after completing activities in which we had formerly engaged with the expectation that they would be meaningful. But once we have completed these activities, a void emerges.

I shall illustrate the role of the absence of meaningful activity with examples from John Stuart Mill and Leo Tolstoy (Section 2). I shall then clarify the assumptions that frame the discussion and sketch the general picture of the life situation shared by Mill and Tolstoy (Section 3). Next, I shall demonstrate the advantages of focusing on the absence of meaningful activity as we perceive their situation (Section 4). To conclude, I suggest that focusing on absence leads to a broader view of life's meaning (Section 5). I therefore explain how we should understand, evaluate and feel about situations that involve the absence of meaningful activity.

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2. Mill and Tolstoy

The significant role for the absence of meaningful activity that I explore in this paper traces to Mill's *Autobiography* and Tolstoy's *My Confession*. Both texts often figure in philosophical discussions on meaning in life, but I shall bring out some hitherto under researched aspects.

2.1 Mill's *Autobiography*

In his *Autobiography*, Mill writes as follows:

“Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?” And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, “No!” At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.¹

First, although Mill uses the terms “joy” and “happiness” here, I interpret him as discussing *meaningfulness*, as do many scholars.² Understood this way, the story's most basic feature is that, while completing activities seems to contribute positively to life's meaningfulness, the very same thing also makes a negative contribution.

We thus learn several lessons from this text. Most recently, Gwen Bradford takes Mill's situation to suggest that the achievement—the state of affairs where one's objects are “realized” or “completely effected”—of an objectively valuable outcome does not guarantee subjective fulfilment. If we assume a subjective–objective hybrid theory, such as that proposed by Susan Wolf,³ merely

¹ Mill (2018 [1873]), pp. 77–78.

² See, e.g., Landau (2017), p. 149. In addition, Samuel Clark notes that during the crisis Mill recognised a lack of development in aesthetic and emotional capacities for a flourishing life (Clark 2010).

³ Wolf (1997), p. 211.

completing a valuable activity is insufficient for the activity to be meaningful.⁴ In addition, Mill’s story indicates that completing a goal on the one hand, and pursuing a goal on the other, hold distinctive significance.⁵ And the third lesson—this one based on an insight from Neil Levy⁶—is that an activity remains lacking when it is not self-propagating.⁷ Bradford notes that the meaning-deficiency in Mill’s situation is partly attributable to his engagement in activities that lack a self-propagating feature, such as “As we make progress toward the goal, new aspects of the goal emerge and so the pursuit expands.”⁸

Kieran Setiya argues that Mill’s situation represents a (precocious) midlife crisis. It highlights, for him, the problem with dedicating one’s life to “telic” activities, where people pursue a goal and aim to finish it. It also highlights the importance of “atelic” activities.⁹

These insights are useful, and I do not disagree with these authors. I argue, rather, that we have yet to address another aspect of the situation. Suppose the activities in which Mill has engaged *thus far* have been completed. Bradford takes these completed activities as lacking in meaningfulness because they lack the feature of self-propagation.¹⁰ But Mill’s concern also seems to come from his *no longer engaging in meaningful activities*. I wish to emphasise that Mill’s sense of having “nothing left to live for” stems from the *absence* of meaningful activities and, more precisely, the *anticipated absence* of meaningful activities in the near future. In short, I wish to focus on Mill’s concern about what comes *after* his activities end—a *void* of meaningful activity, which seems to relate to his negative feelings.

In contrast, when Setiya discusses the issue with telic activities, he says that “not all activities are like this. Some do not aim at a point of termination or exhaustion: a final state in which they have been achieved and *there is no more to do*.”¹¹ This statement pertains to the *absence* of meaningful activity. Now, Setiya focuses on atelic activities as alternatives and proposes them as crucial for avoiding the absence of meaningful activities. I do not disagree with this perspective because, while Setiya does claim that completing telic activities

⁴ Bradford (2022), p. 59.

⁵ Bradford (2022), p. 59.

⁶ Levy (2005).

⁷ Bradford (2022), pp. 61–62.

⁸ Bradford (2022), p. 61.

⁹ Setiya (2014), p. 13; Setiya (2017), esp. pp. 133–134.

¹⁰ Bradford (2022), p. 61.

¹¹ Setiya (2014), p. 12, emphasis added; see also Setiya (2017), p. 140.

results in an absence of meaningful activity, he does not further argue for how we ought to understand the absence itself. I shall go in another direction to specifically discuss the nature of this absence.¹²

We can make another contrast to emphasise the focus on an absence of meaningful activity. Despite Mill's claim that there is "nothing left to live for," he continues to work. He writes,

During this time I was not incapable of my usual occupations. I went on with them mechanically, by the mere force of habit. I had been so drilled in a certain sort of mental exercise, that I could still carry it on when all the spirit had gone out of it.¹³

How should one understand this statement? One interpretation is that these activities, his "usual occupations," are devoid of meaning; another could characterise Mill's situation as disengagement from activities that would otherwise be meaningful. I favour the second interpretation, although the fact that the situation clearly involves some activities to engage in seems to suggest the first.

2.2 Tolstoy's My Confession

Tolstoy's *My Confession* offers a second example of the absence of meaningful activity. Reflecting on the inevitability of death, Tolstoy—who was already a prestigious novelist—met with a profound sense of what he had achieved. However, he came to a point at which he felt a sense of meaninglessness.¹⁴

[T]hinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: "All right, you will be more famous than [...] all the writers in the world,

¹² Setiya's view seems plausible as a practical solution to situations such as Mill's. For alternative views and critiques, see Bradford (2022, p. 63) and Sigrist (2015).

¹³ Mill (2018 [1873]), p. 81.

¹⁴ Iddo Landau notes that Tolstoy infers wrongly from life's finitude to the meaninglessness of the activities he engages while alive (Landau 2017, p. 91). Setiya links Tolstoy's crisis to the midlife crisis and suggests, "Although it is often inspired by the acknowledgement of mortality, the crisis can occur in other ways. [...] Since it is independent of death, the midlife crisis is not solved by the prospect of living forever" (Setiya 2014, p. 3). I claim elsewhere that Tolstoy conflates the vanishing of a meaningful life and a meaningless life (Yoshizawa 2015, pp. 141–145).

—what of it?” [...] if I did not answer them, I could not live.

I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by.¹⁵

In comparison to Mill, it seems more natural to interpret Tolstoy as believing that his previous activities held little meaning. My point, though, is that we can also take this situation as his believing that he was not engaging in meaningful activities *at that time*. Note how he continues:

My life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, and could not help breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping; but *there was no life*, because there were no desires the gratification of which I might find reasonable.¹⁶

To take this circumstance as involving the absence of meaningful activity—or even as “no life,” as Tolstoy puts it—would be appropriate. It also seems clear that taking the activities in which Tolstoy was engaging at that time, such as “breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping,” as meaningless does not really describe the situation. These basic activities have always continued, and there is no reason to evaluate them as inherently negative. The point is even more apparent here than it is in Mill.

3. Assumptions and General Sketch

The rest of this paper clarifies the significance of focusing on the *absence* of meaningful activity. I first outline the assumptions that frame the argument (Section 3.1). I then sketch a general picture of the life situation shared by Mill and Tolstoy (Section 3.2).

3.1 Assumptions

First, I outline the assumptions I make in my discussion and subsequent argument.

¹⁵ Tolstoy (1904 [1882]), p. 18.

¹⁶ Tolstoy (1904 [1882]), p. 19, emphasis added.

(1) My discussion applies only to the standard view that meaningfulness is an evaluative notion. I have no argument against any non-standard view on which meaningfulness might be better understood by non-evaluative concepts, including intelligibility; this is simply because I have no scope to consider it here.¹⁷ But I do aim to keep open additional conceptual options as much as possible. Although a purpose-based understanding for meaning is the most straightforward way to apply the points raised in this paper, it is not the only one.

(2) My discussion remains neutral on whether the subjective, objective or hybrid views are correct. But my argument runs more smoothly if it is understood through the lens of both subjective and objective elements; usually this is possible with a hybrid view.

(3) I presuppose a tolerant ontology for the bearer of meaning, called a “mixed view”: both life as a whole and its parts may have meaning.¹⁸ I take activities to be parts of life. The reason is that this paper’s focus is on what we might call “doing.” I do not think that theories of meaningfulness in general exclude other ontological categories, such as states of affairs. One might think that if the pure whole-life view is true, on which “only life as an entire period can be something that counts as ‘meaningful’ or not,”¹⁹ then a focus on the meaningfulness of activities makes little sense. But various modifications can make this conception sensible: we can say, for example, that an activity possesses *properties* whose instantiations contribute to the “whole-life” meaning. These properties might include an activity’s *being pursued toward a significant purpose*, or *being pursued toward a significant purpose while one feels satisfaction with the pursuit*. Mixed views, in contrast, might say that an activity possesses properties contributing to “part-life” meaning, and these “part-life” meanings would then accumulate to evaluate the “whole-life” meaning. I adopt for simplicity a mixed view about the bearer of meaningfulness.

(4) Related to the previous assumption, I use the term “activity” to include several distinguishable action types, particularly those that are telic or atelic—namely, whether they are directed toward its completion or not.²⁰

¹⁷ For defences of this non-standard view, see Repp (2018), Seachris (2019) and Thomas (2019). For arguments against it, see Metz (2019) and Landau (2021). Joshua Lewis Thomas claims also that Mill’s crisis is properly interpreted by a sense-based view (Thomas 2019, p. 1572). Although I do not oppose this interpretation, I agree with Landau that we may also interpret the story in accordance with standard value-based views (Landau 2021, pp. 230–231).

¹⁸ Metz (2013), Section 3.5.

¹⁹ Metz (2013), p. 38.

²⁰ Setiya, for example, uses the term “activities” to refer to both telic (2014, esp. p. 16) and atelic

(5) In addition, and as an implication of the third assumption, I also suppose that different phases of a person’s life may be evaluated in different ways for meaningfulness. For instance, it is conceivable that one’s youth stage was meaningful, whereas one’s midlife was less so, and so on.

(6) I do not address the concept of “anti-meaning,” which is the negative opposite of meaning. There is debate over whether meaning has three categories—meaningful (positive), anti-meaningful (negative) and meaningless (neutral)—or two categories—meaningful (positive) and meaningless (neutral).²¹ But even if we accept the concept of anti-meaning, it is not likely to affect our evaluation of the absence of activity, which I focus on here. The absence of activity implies that there is no activity possessing either positive meaning or negative anti-meaning. If evaluated at all, it would be neutral only.

(7) One might be concerned, finally, about uncertainty: how is one to be able to evaluate the meaningfulness of life activities in life’s midstream? For simplicity, we may assume determinism, or we may focus only on retrospective evaluations. But I prefer another approach: the idea of the absence of meaningful activity still makes sense even with the modifiers “probably” or “will turn out to be.” We might say, for example, “a person S is not engaging in activities that *will turn out to be* meaningful,” contrasting this statement with “S is engaging in activities that are *probably* meaningful,” and so on. Life decisions about meaningfulness, and also about other values such as morality and well-being, are practically significant even in uncertainty. But I set that issue aside here.

3.2 General Sketch

I give a general sketch for the situations I focus on. While they do differ,²² I characterise the situations of Mill and Tolstoy as involving a preceding phase during which their (seemingly) meaningful activities are conducted and completed (Phase 1). They then

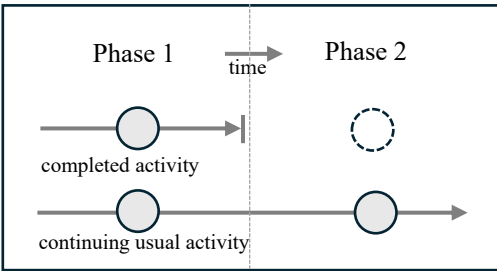


Fig. 1: General sketch

activities (esp. p. 13). Michael Sigrist, on the other hand, distinguishes “action” into telic “achievement” and atelic “activity” (2015, p. 85). I adopt the former usage. This approach preserves the clarity and context of the discussion throughout the paper.

²¹ See, e.g., Nyholm and Campbell (2022).

²² Setiya claims that Tolstoy’s crisis turns on “pervasive skepticism about reasons or values, on philosophical doubts so fundamental they owe nothing to the shape of human life,” but Mill’s crisis is

involve a succeeding phase in which there are no such meaningful activities (Phase 2). As discussed above, both Mill and Tolstoy describe their negative feelings as marking the transition between these two phases. My focus here is only on these phases and the transition between them, even though, as a matter of fact, both Mill and Tolstoy eventually recovered following Phase 2. Importantly, these cases are not examples of thwarted achievements. Moreover, several “usual” activities continue during both phases.

As described, this type of situation is common for events such as resigning from a job, graduating from school or reflecting on one’s career achievements, often during midlife.²³ These may be cases in which one’s activities thus far are not thwarted in Phase 1, before a void of meaningful activity emerges in Phase 2. And as long as we live, we always find ourselves involved in the “usual” activities that span both phases.

4. Absence of Meaningful Activity

The stories of Mill and Tolstoy show individuals who, after completing their intended purpose, then experience, perhaps paradoxically, a sense of meaninglessness. Scholars have found such cases intriguing. Iddo Landau characterises Mill’s situation as “the paradox of the end.”²⁴ While these stories teach many lessons, they highlight in particular an interesting relationship between completing activities and seemingly inappropriate negative feelings that require some explanation.

I argue that these paradoxical negative feelings are directed toward the absence of meaningful activity during Phase 2. Certain limitations in Bradford’s analysis of the Mill and Tolstoy situations underscore the significance of this absence. I first schematically illustrate Bradford’s notion of the self-propagating feature of meaningful activities (Section 4.1). Then, I demonstrate that her view does not fully account for why these situations merit such negative feelings (Section 4.2). I then show how the absence of meaningful activity functions (Section 4.3).

not like such an “unqualified emptiness” (2017, pp. 38–39; see also 2014, pp. 2–3). In contrast, Bradford juxtaposes Mill and Tolstoy’s texts as both suggesting that achievement alone is not sufficient and that subjective components are also required for life’s meaning (Bradford 2016, pp. 801–802; 2022, p. 71).

²³ Setiya (2014; 2017).

²⁴ Landau (2017), p. 146.

4.1 Bradford's View

As noted, Bradford analyses the Phase 1 activities as not self-propagating because of the absence of subsequent meaningful activities in Phase 2. If Mill's Phase 1 activities led to other activities in Phase 2, then they are taken as self-propagating. To use

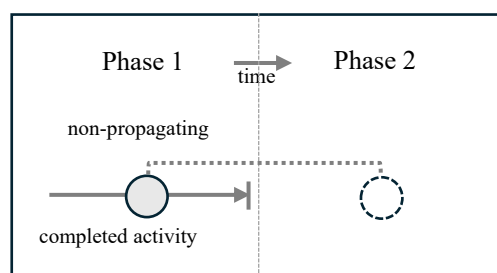


Fig. 2: Non-propagating activity

To use another example familiar to contemporary researchers: if one engages in an activity to publish a philosophy paper, then that activity would not be self-propagating. In contrast, though, if one engages in that activity with the aim of pursuing some broader truth about the world, justice and so on, it is more likely to develop into future activities—perhaps even becoming open-ended.²⁵ In relation to Mill, Bradford suggests that the activity completed in Phase 1 does not have this self-propagating feature, as Mill engaged in it as an activity that would be “completely effected” and would not lead to future ones. It would thus have diminished meaning.²⁶

I should note that I have simplified Bradford's view in two respects. First, her actual characterisation for the concept of “self-propagation” seems richer. It may involve a phenomenon whereby, for example, as an activity with a certain goal moves forward, the goal itself becomes clearer.²⁷ My characterisation of self-propagation focuses only on its capacity to lead to future activities. But one might also think that my simplification is not that remote from Bradford's view, because the difference lies primarily in a different perspective on the individuation of activities. For instance, when Activity A in Phase 1 leads to some new Activity B in Phase 2, we could also describe that situation as Activity A developing into a different Activity C that then spans Phases 1 and 2; C would encompass Activities A and B. Here Activity C's goal can be seen as one that develops from the A's goal, and this goal, at least from a future perspective, can be regarded as having been less clear. In any case, because it is reasonable to assume that the central characteristic of self-propagation is its capacity to lead to new future activities, I focus on this capacity alone.

²⁵ Levy (2005), p. 185.

²⁶ Bradford (2022), p. 61.

²⁷ Bradford (2022), p. 62.

Second, Bradford also claims that an activity’s self-propagating feature has potentially limitless value. She bases this value on the concept of a *challenge* or difficulty.²⁸ I do not take this factor into account explicitly in my reconstruction above. But as I understand it, her view and mine may contrast as follows—suppose an initial self-propagating activity in Phase 1, Activity A, leads to an activity in Phase 2, Activity B; this activity then grows into a larger one, Activity C, which consequently subsumes Activities A and B as its parts. This development progresses through future Phases 3, 4 and beyond. Bradford takes Activity C as a significant challenge because, as it proceeds from Phase 1 to later phases, new goals continue to emerge. I perceive, in contrast, the initial Activity A as being completed in Phase 1; it leads to Activity B, which is completed in Phase 2 and so forth. I do not posit the entire subsuming activity, Activity C, but we may consider the entire sequence of generating new goals as a significant challenge. Although it may be the case that the value of the challenging Activity C is not entirely reducible to the mere sum of its parts—here, Activities A, B and so on—its overall value must be grounded partly in the values of its parts. And each part must have its value independently from the whole. If this were not true, then when the entire activity is thwarted, the values of completed early parts would disappear all at once. This implication seems implausible, however. I thus believe that my piecemeal picture of the relationship between these activities is compatible with Bradford’s apparently more unified picture, while mine can still illuminate the focus here on the absence of activity.²⁹

4.2 Bradford’s View and Possible Interpretations of the Situations

In the above picture, then, where should we place the paradoxical negative feelings? First, as suggested in Section 2, the most unlikely possibility is that Mill’s and Tolstoy’s negative feelings fit with their continuing activities: “usual

²⁸ Bradford (2022), p. 65.

²⁹ It is worth noting that my view aligns with a description Bradford provides as follows: “The more you accomplish, the more is possible for you to accomplish. As you move along toward the goal, you can turn around and look back and see what you have accomplished from where you started” (Bradford 2022, p. 63). This statement seems to assume that the parts composing the entire activity (Activity C) can be individuated as “what you have accomplished.” Moreover, grounding the value of the whole self-propagating activity at least partially in the values of the activity’s parts avoids potential objections to her view, which suggests the implausible implication that protracting the goal would be preferable, and completing the potentially open-ended goal would be impossible (Bradford 2022, p. 64).

occupations” for Mill, and “breathing, eating, drinking, and sleeping” for Tolstoy. This view is most unlikely because these two people perform all these routine activities even while engaging in the typically meaningful activities in Phase 1. There therefore seems no compelling reason for them to view those usual activities inherently negatively.

Another possibility is that these negative feelings are directed toward the “non-propagating” past activity in Phase 1. But this interpretation presents a difficulty and cannot be the whole story. Although it is plausible that a self-propagating feature renders an activity meaningful, perhaps even highly so, it is not clear how a *lack* of that feature renders an activity *negative* in terms of meaningfulness to the extent of meriting negative feelings. The lack of a self-propagating feature would be considered negative only *if* having that feature were a necessary condition for an activity’s meaningfulness. This appears too demanding, however. Most importantly, as noted earlier, the situations here involve a *completed* activity, not a thwarted one, even though it is non-propagating. There is a difficulty in explaining why we should view the completion as negative.

Let us examine the difficulty by shifting the focus to propagated future activities. As noted above, the value of the self-propagating feature primarily stems from the value of the future activities propagated from the preceding one. In some cases, as Bradford suggests, the self-propagating feature could “supply a potentially limitless source of meaning.”³⁰ If one engaged in a self-propagating activity in Phase 1, for example, then it would formulate a new activity in each of Phases 2, 3, 4 and so on. One’s entire life would then be highly meaningful because it would include many completed activities. But we have not yet shown how the situation in which future activities are not propagated might fit with the negative feelings. Even if the completed activity in Phase 1 were not self-propagating and as such did not lead to future activities, the activity in Phase 1 would still be a *completed* activity. Something is lacking, therefore, in explaining why we should consider the situations negative.

To sum up so far, while I do not oppose Bradford’s view, I believe certain elements still require further explanation. In her account, those who engage in a self-propagating activity would indeed have no reason to experience negative feelings. However, this does not explain why disengagement from such a self-

³⁰ Bradford (2022), p. 65.

propagating activity merits negative feelings.

4.3 How the Absence of Meaningful Activity Works

It is at this point that the absence of activity in Phase 2 enters the picture. The paradoxical negative feelings would connect to the absence of meaningful activity in Phase 2. On this view, the function of the self-propagating feature—the function of generating new future activities—is taken as filling the absence of meaningful activities in Phase 2 and beyond.

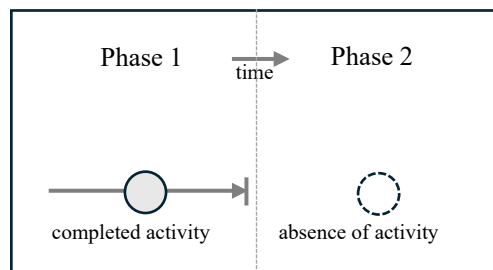


Fig. 3: Absent activity

Introducing just the absence of meaningful activity into the picture cannot by itself explain the negative feelings, however. There would be no inherently negative factor in Phases 1 and 2 to fit with the negative feelings—because, as seen above, it is implausible to regard the completed activity in Phase 1 as negative, while the absence of meaningful Phase 2 activity is neither positively nor negatively valuable for meaning (see Section 3.1, assumption (6)).

But we can offer an explanation by looking closely at the situations. Like Mill and Tolstoy, those who have engaged in activities such as articulating philosophical thought or writing novels in Phase 1 maintain an *evaluative attitude*—such as *concern* or *care*—toward these activity *types* during Phase 1.³¹ It also seems plausible to assume that an attitude like this continues during Phase 2, the period after a *particular* activity is completed in Phase 1, which is an object of that attitude. This is because we do not want just *any* activity to be meaningful. Each person wants to engage in specific *types* of activities, and expects *them* to be meaningful. This might be because meaning is not the only value category that matters to us: we also care about morality, well-being, and so on. We want activities that earn daily bread, activities that give us intellectual pleasure and activities that involve interactions with specific individuals, to be meaningful. These attitudes vary among people, typically persist long-term and are rooted in each person's way of living thus far.³² The point is that even when an *instance* of

³¹ From the perspective of subjective or hybrid views, this evaluative attitude is naturally assumed in Phase 1 in order for the activity to be meaningful, because activities that are meaningful for a person are those that the person positively evaluates. But even objectivism can acknowledge such an evaluative attitude while denying that meaningfulness depends on these subjective evaluative attitudes.

³² For a view that one's character or disposition, which is certainly a part of one's way of living thus

such an activity type that one evaluates positively is completed in Phase 1, it is not likely that the attitude will fade.

We find an explanation based on this evaluative attitude. In Phase 2, if one is engaging in a particular instance of such *types* of activities, whether ongoing from Phase 1 or newly started in Phase 2, this fulfils, or at least resonates with, one’s evaluative attitude. If this

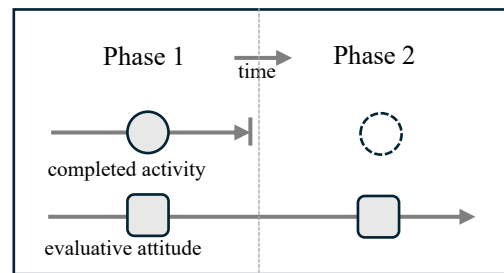


Fig. 4: Evaluative attitude

activity is absent, a discrepancy arises between the evaluative attitude and its object, which may then be experienced negatively.

I believe that this picture can explain many situations in which one’s activity ends and then a void emerges. But the explanation may require some expansion because it does not seem to apply well to Mill’s situation as it stands.³³ This concern comes from the fact that the explanation relies on one’s evaluative attitude in Phase 2. Having such an evaluative attitude seems to imply finding “charm” in the object of their attitude, so to speak; Mill does state however that, “The end has ceased to charm.” It might thus be plausible to think that Mill’s evaluative attitude probably fades as completion approaches. This might be because if Mill’s evaluative attitude in Phase 1 is precise, such as when he appreciates seeing his distinct philosophical thought realised, there is little reason to maintain it after the corresponding activity is completed. Here, it seems reasonable to suppose further that there is no other, more flexible evaluative attitude toward an activity type, as discussed above. We could describe this situation as a lack of “charm” in anything. In this case, Phase 2 becomes a void where no evaluative attitude is to be either fulfilled or unfulfilled by its object. This situation would therefore not inherently involve a negative factor fitting with the negative feelings in Phase 2, even though it does seem to engender negative feelings.

Even in this case, nevertheless, *if* one is compelled to engage in *meaningful activity in general*, then anxiety may naturally arise. Such an inclination toward meaning is prevalent, I believe, though not universal, regardless of cultural, educational or personal temperament influences. At the least it is not unnatural to

far, plays an essential role in the theory of meaningfulness—especially in terms of an achievement-based conception—see Brogaard and Smith (2005, p. 450).

³³ I am grateful to James Tartaglia, Michael Hauskeller and Nikolaos Gkogkas for pushing me to address this concern.

suppose that Mill, who had been given an exceptionally excellence-oriented education in his youth, would exhibit such a tendency.³⁴ If one possesses this attitude, it may lead to negative feelings, especially when one perceives it as challenging to begin new activities with the expectation of their being meaningful. What is important here is that if one has this blanket attitude toward meaning, and meaningful activities are absent, then the situation fits with negative feelings. Here the absence plays an essential role.³⁵

This view aligns with the fact that not all completed activities evoke negative feelings.³⁶ From this perspective, there is no problem if one feels satisfied with the completed activity in the absence of subsequent activity. Whether one has or should have negative feelings depends on whether one has a relevant evaluative attitude, which one might direct toward a specific activity type or toward meaning in general. If one does not have this attitude, and the conditions fortunately allow, one could spend some or even a long time doing nothing meaningful, and be at ease.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated the significance of the absence of meaningful activity. To my knowledge, this topic has not been explicitly discussed in existing literature. This absence plays a crucial role in life and is particularly evident in situations in which previously engaged-in activities have been completed. The absence offers a supplemental explanation for certain situations, particularly when combined with the concept of a self-propagating activity. My approach addresses an insufficiency in Bradford's view about the negative feelings associated with these situations. I have argued that it is essential to recognise the absence of meaningful activity as something meriting the negative feelings experienced by Mill and Tolstoy.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise another general benefit of the focus on

³⁴ This point might align with the lesson that Mill himself gained from his crisis, that pursuing happiness as such can sometimes paradoxically distance one from attaining it (Mill (2018 [1873]), p. 82). Although, as noted, Mill refers to "happiness," it is not unreasonable to think that the same holds for meaningfulness.

³⁵ It is worth noting that such a blanket evaluative attitude toward meaning is not like a desire whose fulfilment is valuable. This attitude may indirectly make one's life more meaningful by compelling one to engage in many specific meaningful activities. In this case, what contributes to meaningfulness must be these specific activities, and not the blanket attitude's fulfilment.

³⁶ Landau (2017), pp. 149–150.

meaningful activity's absence. Specifically, in examining possible interpretations for Mill's and Tolstoy's situations, I claim that identifying the appropriate targets for negative feelings can reveal that negative evaluations of usual activities are unnecessary. I also claim that recognising this absence helps to prevent the devaluation of completed activities—even those without a self-propagating feature. I also suggest that it is often unnecessary to regard as negative a situation that lacks something meaningful. The relationship between these observations and their potential applications deserves further attention. It seems plausible to conclude that the approach given here not only offers a broader perspective on the situations discussed but also, hopefully, paves the way for a more relaxed understanding of what constitutes meaning in life.

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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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