

Mental Evolution and the Universal Meaning of Life

Abstract: Is a universal meaning of life (MoL) possible? In this paper I argue for an affirmative answer: Starting out from the MoL's initial definition as "the active and successful pursuit of the ultimate end in life (UEiL)" and another initial definition of the UEiL, I first introduce four UEiL and MoL categories. In the context of their discussion, I add the elements of non-physical relation and universal scope to the definitions of UEiL and MoL (sect. 2). After those more general aspects, the discussion turns to the specifics of mental evolution and evolvedness. In this respect, the concept of traditional organic or physicalistic evolution is expanded to one of 'holistic evolution,' a distinction between holistic evolutionary process, the UEiL of mental evolution and the virtue of mental evolvedness is established, and the definition of as well as the chain of arguments for this paper's universalistic 'mental evolution account' of the MoL is rounded off (sect. 3).

Keywords: universal meaning of life, ultimate end in life, holistic theory of evolution, mental evolution, mental evolvedness, quality of consciousness

1. Introduction

Beyond the academic world, Western people clearly have a growing interest in issues of life's meaning. Psychics, televangelists, and self-help gurus are extensively addressing them, but academic philosophers are not. (Metz 2002, 811)

The above was stated more than a decade ago and the literature on the topic of meaning of

life (henceforth MoL) has grown since then, with the topic itself becoming more established as a genuine philosophical topic. Despite those developments, however, I cannot entirely shake the impression that this topic is to some extent still treated as “something of a backwater” (ibid., 782), as “the black sheep of the normative family” (ibid., 811) or, overall, as something that is not yet taken particularly seriously in current academic philosophy.¹ In my opinion, that state of affairs (wherever it may apply) is rather unfitting and unfortunate, for instance because “[q]uestions about life's meaning seem no less manageable than questions often raised in other normative contexts” (Metz 2003, 69–70).

More importantly though, the topic of MoL is also worthy of our attention since finding a universally acceptable answer to the MoL-puzzle would be immensely beneficial for all of humankind in many ways: It would, for instance, make it easier for people around the world to live fulfilled and meaningful and thus better lives instead of lives that are, in a sense and to a degree, ‘wasted’ on the attainment of comparatively unimportant goals. Additionally, there is also a great unifying and peace-bringing element attached to the MoL, because if a universal MoL or a therein contained universal ‘ultimate end in life’ (UEiL) could be found, widely communicated and accepted, this would greatly help with uniting people around the world in the pursuit of a common goal. This, in turn, would to some extent prevent human societies (either local or global) from becoming relatively dysfunctional due to various oftentimes incompatible ends being pursued by various special interest groups in or acting on those societies.

It is for these and other reasons that the topic of MoL should be treated as a serious social, philosophical and ethical issue with not to be underestimated negative or positive

¹ Cf. Wolf 2007a, 6: “Academic philosophers do not talk much about meaningfulness in life” or Metz 2013a, introduction: “[I]t is only in the last 50 years or so that something approaching a distinct field on the meaning of life has been established in Anglo-American philosophy, and it is only in the last 30 years that debate with real depth has appeared.”

consequences, depending on whether the MoL is not known or acted against (negative consequences) or known and implemented (positive consequences). As such and given that we obviously prefer positive over negative consequences and the maximization of the former, it would only be fitting for us to finally give this elephant in the room the attention that it deserves, because in order to play a ‘game’ such as the ‘game of life’ well (an overall quite fitting analogy, I believe), it is necessary to understand the greater ends, goals or purposes of that game. Otherwise there is a very good chance that the individual ‘players’ will just stumble about rather disorientedly, adopting a lot of ultimately rather insignificant goals and doing a lot of ultimately rather pointless things, thereby finishing this game without much of a clue of what it was actually all about or which course of action would most likely have provided for overall better results in the sense of a more meaningful and fulfilled life.

These are some of the main reasons why we cannot afford to treat one of the most fundamentally important questions in the entire history of philosophy or human society as offhandedly as we used to and still do or why we cannot leave this topic in the hands of “psychics, televangelists, self-help gurus” and other people of questionable expertise, intent or even sanity, because there is too much at stake here for all of us, both in terms of potential benefit and potential loss.² Instead, qualified professionals in the form of philosophers need to deal with the topic of MoL since this will greatly increase the probability of finding a fitting and fulfilling universal MoL.

Regarding this philosopher and this paper and as already largely indicated by the title, the following main hypothesis will be argued for:

(I) The universal MoL lies in the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL of mental

² Kekes 2000, 23: “If our lives are governed by understanding it, then we shall not only avoid unnecessary suffering, but enjoy positive benefits.”

evolution.

The account of the UEiL and MoL that will be presented in this paper I will accordingly call the ‘mental evolution account.’ Earlier influences for this account are (among others) Wolf’s “fitting fulfillment account” (2007a, 20ff) and more so Smuts’ “good cause account” (2013), but mostly the unnamed and in academic circles so far relatively unknown account of Campbell according to which “[t]he evolution of our individuated unit of consciousness is the point of our existence” (2007, 399). Before presenting that mental evolution account in section 3 though and on a more general note, I will first introduce four fundamental UEiL categories and distinctions and position this paper’s proposed UEiL in their contexts.

2. Fundamental Categories and Distinctions

In a general sense that still omits mention of any specific answers, I would propose to define the MoL as “the active and successful pursuit of a highly worthy (or fitting or significant)³ and also fulfilling goal or end.” Given that the UEiL will be defined as that highly worthy and fulfilling end, however, it is also possible to shorten the above general definition of the MoL to “the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL.”

The element of “active” is adopted from Wolf (1997, 213: “meaningfulness in life arises from engagement in worthwhile activity” or 2007a, 7–8: “the relationship between the subject and the object of her attraction must be an active one”) or James 2010. To that I also add “successful” since active pursuit does not automatically lead to success and since actively pursuing and succeeding is obviously more desirable than actively pursuing and failing. Regarding the combination of active and successful, one could also talk of “achievement” (cf.

³ Cf. Wolf 2007a, 6–7, 20ff and Smuts 2013, 548.

James 2005 or also Brogaard & Smith 2005, 447: “a person must be responsible for his achievements in order for his life to be meaningful”), but I will stay with “active and successful” since this is a more differentiated way of putting it.

Moving on to the elements of worthiness and fulfillingness, we can also see a connection here in the sense that successfully pursuing worthy goals leads to a feeling of fulfillment, meaningfulness or, more objectively speaking, *meaning in life* (MiL). Conversely, pursuing worthless goals does not lead to fulfillment, but the associated feeling may still be pleasant or satisfying in a different sense.⁴ The gradual presence or lack of presence of the feeling of fulfillment can thus be regarded as an important indicator about whether or not or to what degree a certain activity acts towards the implementation of the UEiL or not.

Overall, it also seems quite clear that the UEiL is the most fundamentally important part of the MoL. As such and in order to understand or define the MoL, we first and foremost need to understand or define the UEiL. Taking into account the four previous elements, I propose the following general definition of the UEiL: “a highly pursuit-worthy and, especially if successfully implemented, fulfilling end that takes precedence over all other ends and that also remains this ultimate end throughout our lives.”⁵ In order to make this definition even more specific but also in order to give the discussion of UEiL and MoL a proper categorial framework or frame of reference, I will introduce four fundamental UEiL categories or dimensions and position this paper’s proposed UEiL in the context of those monodimensional categories.

⁴ Examples for this would be “lying on the beach on a beautiful day, or eating a perfectly ripe peach” (Wolf 2007a, 19): There is nothing “worthy” about these goals or no deeper “fulfillment” in their attainment, but the associated feeling is generally still positive in a different and perhaps more superficial sense. For a similar distinction also cf. Mill 1863, 11: “Human beings have faculties more elevated than the animal appetites, and when once made conscious of them, do not regard anything as happiness which does not include their gratification.”

⁵ I hesitate to say “an end for which everything else is a means,” because the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL is in turn a means for the end of generating positive effects, which are in turn a means for other positive effects, etc. I am also inclined to believe that its unsuccessful pursuit can already contribute somewhat to the feeling of fulfillment; thus the addition of “especially.”

2.1 Existence: Realism/Objectivism vs. Anti-Realism/Subjectivism

The first UEiL category that I would like to discuss is that of existence, with the key question being “*As what* does the UEiL exist?” (I am here obviously working on the assumption that UEiL and MoL do exist somehow, somewhere). The two classical choices in this respect are realism vs. anti-realism or, as my preferred terms, objectivism vs. subjectivism, i.e. the choice between subject- or mind-*independent* vs. subject- or mind-*dependent* existence of the UEiL.⁶ In this respect, I lean towards subjectivism but without ruling out an objective existence of UEiL or MoL .

This subjectivist inclination is explained as follows: Even if the UEiL were to exist objectively, it would still need to be discovered, understood, adopted or adhered to by subjects or subjective minds. The discovery, understanding, adoption, etc. of something objective is thus always subjective, because all of that mental content would cease to exist if the respective subjects ceased to exist.⁷ As such, there would *always* be subjective elements, epistemological and otherwise, added to an objectively existing UEiL or MoL.⁸ If, on the other hand, no such objective existence were to be the case, then these subjective elements of or about the UEiL or MoL now *constitute their entire existence* (‘understanding is existence,’ if you will; allusion to Berkeley’s idealist or subjectivist dictum *esse est percipi* fully intended). Without being able to tell which one of those two general ontological possibilities

⁶ For according uses of “real/realism” and “objective/objectivism” see e.g. Joyce 2009, sect. 1: “Traditionally, to hold a realist position with respect to *X* is to hold that *X* exists in a mind-independent manner” or Devitt 1991, 44: “According to these idealists, the entities are not in a certain respect ‘objective’: they depend for their existence and nature on the cognitive activities and capacities of our minds.”

⁷ In the respective ontology of understanding or mental content, including numbers, I am essentially following Brouwer’s intuitionism (1975) since that intuitionism is the reasonable middle ground between “the Scylla of platonism (with its epistemological problems) and the Charybdis of formalism (with its poverty of content)” (van Atten 2012, sect. 3). Platonism, in other words and in my opinion, proposes *too much* existence whereas formalism or nominalism propose *too little* existence about mental content, whereas intuitionism (ontologically essentially reducible to subjectivism) avoids falling into either one of those unfitting extremes.

⁸ Cf. Wolf 1997, 211, or 2007a, 7: “Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness.”

is the case – as a proponent of indirect perceptual realism (cf. Sollberger 2013) and due to related epistemic hurdles I do not consider it prudent to make any particularly specific statements about objective reality or ‘stuff’ in it – but with at least the subjectively existing elements of or about the UEiL and MoL being a certainty, my general and intentionally vague conclusion is that the scales would appear to be tilted in favor of a subjective existence of UEiL and MoL (note that this in no way contradicts claims about their universality since that is a claim about a different and independent category).

2.2 Origin: Naturalism vs. Supernaturalism

Other fundamental UEiL distinctions can be drawn within the category of origin. Here, the general choices are between naturalism and a supernaturalism, with the classical examples for that being a UEiL that is “chosen” by ourselves or, respectively, a UEiL that is “bestowed” (Metz 2002, 802) by God. Regarding this distinction, my opinion is that we are once again not in a position to give a decisive answer in favor of either a natural or a supernatural origin of the UEiL (meaning that both naturalists *and* supernaturalists should be able to accept my proposed MoL). Due to greatest possible adequate simplicity principles like Ockham’s Razor and due to there being no need for me to reconcile the UEiL with some preconceived religious dogmas, I however generally find it preferable to go for a natural origin of the UEiL if possible. This once again intentionally vague position could accordingly be referred to as ‘preference naturalism.’

Just as with the previous category though, I in the end see no particular need to engage in the discussion of natural vs. supernatural origin of the UEiL either. This is mainly because respective answers would once again appear to be largely speculative. I, however, feel that the MoL discussion should be about more than just such speculative matters,

especially given that such fairly non-speculative points are available, that they make for more concrete and certain results, and that this is generally preferable to by default uncertain speculation. Secondly, also I see no particular need to decide between objective vs. subjective existence or to decide between natural vs. supernatural origin since all of that allows for a *universal* UEiL and MoL⁹ and since it is that universality that counts in the end (at least for wisdom-driven philosophers; for philosophical scholars, the priorities may be different). That being said, I would like to move on to the two other and more important categories where I have a much more committed opinion.

2.3 Relation: ‘Naturalism’ vs. ‘Non-Naturalism’

A third fundamental UEiL distinction can be made within the category of relation, with the key question being “To what ontological sphere(s) is the UEiL related?” In this respect and given that the following are not singular doctrines but rather a “family of related but distinct doctrines” (Ridge 2014, introduction), one could once again distinguish between (a different sense of) naturalism and supernaturalism, for instance as follows: “Supernaturalist theories are views that meaning in life must be constituted by a certain relationship with a spiritual realm. ... In contrast, naturalist theories are views that meaning can obtain in a world as known solely by science” (Metz 2013a, sect. 2). While one might generally find that distinction relatively agreeable, I need to object to it for three reasons.

The first reason for objection is that the terms of naturalism and supernaturalism seem to lend themselves better for the distinction within the category of origin than for the distinction within the category of relation. Given that it is also theoretically conceivable to

⁹ Universalism about the MoL or morality in general is classically aligned with objective existence and/or a supernatural origin, but universalism can just as well be combined with subjective existence and/or a natural origin: It is for instance conceivable that we can intersubjectively agree on a certain general and common MoL theme that originates from ‘impartial reason’ (Darwall 1983, chs. 11–12).

combine a natural origin with a ‘non-natural’ relation as well as a supernatural origin with ‘natural’ relation, it would be appropriate to use terms other than “natural-” and “supernatural-” when talking about the UEiL’s relation.

Secondly, Metz’s definition of naturalism and supernaturalism also seems to conflate different subcategories within the families ‘naturalism’ and (super- or rather) ‘non-naturalism.’ To clarify what I mean by that, I would like to point to Papineau’s (2009) distinction between ontological naturalism and methodological naturalism:¹⁰ In my opinion, it was these two aspects that were conflated in the previous quotation from Metz (2013a), because he would seem to have opposed *ontological* non-naturalism (“spiritual realm”) to *methodological* naturalism (“science,” after all, is about methods). The UEiL or MoL relation in question, however, is purely about ontology (or metaphysics), meaning that we need to oppose *ontological* non-naturalism to *ontological* naturalism in this context.

Yet what are ontological ‘naturalism’ and ‘non-naturalism’ all about anyway? This brings us to my third and most important objection against the above as well as the overall use of methodological and more so ontological/metaphysical ‘naturalism’ and ‘non-naturalism.’ By this I am referring to the circumstance that these terms and especially the latter are little but veiled ways of talking about *physicalism*¹¹ and *non-physicalism*¹² and in need of being replaced by the according terms if clarity of expression and the eliminative reduction of unnecessary concepts are part of our overall agenda (something which I believe

¹⁰ In the context of *moral* non-naturalism (and presumably also *moral* naturalism), Ridge (2014, introduction) distinguishes between a semantical, an epistemological and a metaphysical sense of the doctrine, but for my purposes Papineau’s more general distinction will be more fitting.

¹¹ I prefer “physicalism” over “materialism” since the latter is more of a social phenomenon and since matter does not exhaust the physical dimension.

¹² Cf. Putnam 2002, 130-31: “Contrary to Dewey’s usage, I am using ‘naturalism’ and its derivatives as synonymous with materialism, because regrettably, that is how the word has come to be used.” That use of naturalism is evident in Papineau 2009, sect. 1, just as the use of non-naturalism as non-physicalism is evident in Ridge 2014, introduction: “It is also sometimes suggested that non-naturalism is the thesis that moral properties are *sui generis* and irreducible... .” In personal correspondence, David Papineau has also confirmed that ‘ontological naturalism’ indeed boils down to physicalism.

should generally be the case). Within the ontological UEiL category of relation we should thus not distinguish between confusing ontological ‘naturalism’ vs. ‘non-naturalism,’ but simply between physicalism vs. non-physicalism.

In respect to the thusly semantically and conceptually clarified third UEiL category of relation, I now propose a relation to something non-physical, and while I prefer to interpret that as “mental,” I also leave room to interpret that as “spiritual.” Generally speaking, note that this non-physical relation as well as the “active and successful pursuit” aspect of the MoL are at least implicitly affirmed by the overwhelming majority of specific MoL proposals or suggestions (the following enumeration is limited to allegedly “objectively meaningful” MoLs):

[...] transcending the limits of the self to connect with organic unity (Nozick 1981, ch. 6, 1989, chs. 15-16); realizing human excellence in oneself (Bond 1983, chs. 6, 8); maximally promote non-hedonist goods such as friendship, beauty, and knowledge (Railton 1984); exercising or promoting rational nature in exceptional ways (Hurka 1993; Smith 1997, 179-221; Gewirth 1998, ch. 5); substantially improving the quality of life of people and animals (Singer 1993, ch. 12, 1995, chs. 10-11; Singer 1996, ch. 4); overcoming challenges that one recognizes to be important at one's stage of history (Dworkin 2000, ch. 6); constituting rewarding experiences in the life of the agent or the lives of others the agent affects (Audi 2005); making progress toward ends that in principle can never be completely realized because one's knowledge of them changes as one approaches them (Levy 2005); realizing goals that are transcendent for being long-lasting in duration and broad in scope (Mintoff 2008); or contouring intelligence toward fundamental conditions of human life (Metz 2013[b]). (Metz 2013a, ch. 3.2)

With the exception of Nozick’s proposal and despite the great divergence of the specific

UEiL suggestions, a fundamental common aspect among them appears to be the partial or complete relation to something non-physical. This non-physical relation is affirmed by our intuition, by our more reflected knowledge and by our experience, because all of those sources demonstrate that a purely physicalistic relation or materialistic goals (having a big or ever bigger car, house, income, etc.) cannot possibly yield a proper UeiL. In a way, this is also demonstrated by the well-known tale of Sisyphus who was condemned to stonerolling *ad infinitum* by the Gods of Greek mythology: There is almost universal agreement that such a life is a meaningless life (cf. e.g. Kekes 2000, 23–24, or Landau 2011), with one of the main reasons for this conclusion being that Sisyphus’ ultimate end of stonerolling is related to something purely physical and therefore to something devoid of genuine meaning. Generally speaking and overall, it is therefore a physicalistic worldview as well as a physicalistic conceptions of self (e.g. I am my brain/body/genes) that are the greatest obstacles to understanding the UEiL and to living a meaningful life, because these physicalistic positions are not only ontologically incorrect in my opinion but also utterly unreconcilable with the non-physical relation that is necessary for any serious UEiL candidate.

More would need to be said about the refutation of physicalism, but that discussion has occurred (cf. e.g. Searle 1992, Campbell 2007 or Koons & Bealer 2010) or will largely need to occur elsewhere due to limitations of space. As such, I will limit myself to two general arguments in favor of non-physicalism and a non-physical relation of the UEiL, with the first being the following ‘argument from human nature’: Since we would appear to be primarily *non-physical* beings (e.g. James 1891/1890, ch. X, Noonan 1989, Campbell 2007, Olsen 2010, sect. 3–4, Weinberg 2012) in a primarily *non-physical* world¹³ and since the UEiL needs to be properly related to what we are, it would be unfitting and absurd to relate the

¹³ Campbell 2007, 350: “We are nonphysical consciousness beings experiencing a virtual physical reality, not physical beings experiencing consciousness.”

UEiL to something *physical or materialistic* (e.g. accumulating as much money, power or worldly possessions as possible in a lifetime), because these ends do not properly relate to what we are and because or they do not lead us to where we need to go in our also *mental* (or spiritual) evolution (cf. ch. 3).

That the UEiL must be related to something non-physical can secondly also be inferred from the premises that morality in general is related to non-physical facts and that UEiL and MoL are inherently moral things and therefore also non-physical (= ‘the argument from the nature of morality’). The respective first premise goes back at least to Hume’s *Treatise* and is argued for in the following and sometimes misunderstood¹⁴ passage (additions myself):

Take any action allow’d to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other [i.e. no physical or non-mental] matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object [i.e. the physical act of murder or the dead physical body]. You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast [or rather “mind”], and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a [mental or moral] matter of fact; It lies in yourself, not in the [physical] object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not

¹⁴ By “misunderstood” I mean (among other things) that Hume was falsely interpreted as a proponent of the fact/value dichotomy even though Hume himself actually seems to affirm the existence of (mental) moral facts. This was already pointed out by MacIntyre 1959, 455: “his interest in the facts of morality” or Hunter 1962, 149 (italics original): “the statement ‘Contemplation of this action causes a feeling or sentiment of blame in me’ *is a statement of fact*” or “it is a central part of Hume’s moral theory that moral judgments are statements of fact.” For other or more recent distinctions between the real Hume and the Hume of legend, see the works of Pidgen, e.g. 2007.

qualities in [physical] objects, but perceptions in the mind: (Hume 1896/1739–40, III.I.I, 468–69)

The second premise is that UEiL and MoL are inherently moral or ethical goals, in the sense of “the more a life is moral, the more a life is meaningful” (Metz 2002, 798).¹⁵ The conclusion is that UEiL and MoL must therefore also be related to something non-physical or that “[m]eaning ... is found outside of the natural world” (Kekes 2000, 23), with ‘natural’ meaning nothing but *physical* and ‘non-natural’ nothing but *non-physical*. The necessary relation for any serious UEiL candidate will thus need to be either partially or fully non-physical (i.e. mental or spiritual).

2.4 Scope: Invariantism/Universalism vs. Variantism

A fourth fundamental UEiL distinction can be made within the category of quantitative and qualitative scope, with the key question being “To how many and what kind of subjects does the UEiL apply?” In respect to the latter qualitative aspect, I am of the same opinion as Smuts in that I also “see no reason to be speciesist about meaning” (2013, 558): I can think of no good reason to believe that non-human beings should be excluded from the UEiL of mental evolution since they too are of essentially the same nature (= the argument from universally same nature),¹⁶ since they too are subjected to the process of also mental evolution and devolution (= the argument from universal holistic evolution) and since they too also stand to benefit from the successful pursuit of the UEiL of mental evolution (= the argument from

¹⁵ For a list of authors who support that view, cf. *ibid.*, 798. For other or more recent proponents of that connection between the MoL and morality, cf. Thomas (2005), Campbell (2007), Wolf (2007a, 42ff), Landau (2011) or Smuts (2013):

¹⁶ It is still customary to say that we “have” mind or consciousness. That conclusion, however, would appear to be a result of the homunculus fallacy and begs the question of just who or what ‘possesses’ mind or consciousness. To avoid that problem, I propose to adopt Hume’s (1896/1739–40, I.IV.VI) or Buddhism’s doctrine of no self (Rahula 1974, ch. 6, Giles 1993) or Campbell’s (2007) stance that we “are” mind or consciousness (cf. this paper, fn. 14).

universal benefit). Secondly and in respect to the quantitative aspect, there is also no good reason to believe that the UEiL of mental evolution does not or should not apply to all humans or to all members of another species because, once again, the same three arguments apply. The respective overall position is accordingly best referred to as (quantitative and qualitative) invariantism or universalism about the UEiL and MoL, with opposition coming from various versions of variantism.

In this category, Metz (2013a) and others primarily talk about subjectivism and objectivism,¹⁷ but by using these terms for the category of scope, the result appears to be a conflation between the UEiL categories of existence and scope or, more specifically, an inappropriate ‘forced double wedding’ of objective existence with universal scope and of subjective existence with variant scope. The reason for why this is inappropriate is that one can also conceive of objective but variant UEiLs (e.g. God having specified different UEiLs for different persons or species), just as one can also conceive of (purely) subjective but universal UEiLs (e.g. all subjects agreeing on the same general and variation-allowing UEiL). This is one of the reasons for why it is untrue that “we must look for an objective feature” (Wolf 2007a, 15), for something of “independent value” (ibid., throughout the paper) or that “[a]ny viable theory will be a purely objectivist theory” (Smuts’ 2013, 547), because a ‘proper’ invariant or universal UEiL can also be combined with its (inter)subjective existence.¹⁸

That being clarified, I would like to turn back to the arguments in favor of

¹⁷ Metz 2013a, sect. 3: “Subjectivists believe that there are no invariant standards of meaning because meaning is relative to the subject, i.e., depends on an individual's pro-attitudes such as desires, ends, and choices. ... Objectivists maintain, in contrast, that there are some invariant standards for meaning because meaning is (at least partly) mind-independent, i.e., is a real property that exists regardless of being the object of anyone's mental states” or ibid., sect. 3.1: “According to this view [i.e. subjectivism], meaning in life varies from person to person.”

¹⁸ Metz 2002, 795, on Darwall 1983, esp. 164–66: “a state of affairs confers meaning on a life roughly insofar as all human agents would prefer it to obtain, when reflecting on it from an impersonal standpoint.”

universalism proper; for practical purposes, I will artificially limit the following to a human universalism. As a sort of first general argument I would like to point out that universalism about the UEiL seems to be the natural go-to position in the category of scope not just historically (in the sense of “a meaningful life is a God-abiding or morally good life”), but also since we typically prefer clear-cut and as-simple-as-possible answers and since universalism caters to that a lot better than variantism. We also see that appeal of universalism affirmed by the terms themselves, because “*the* meaning of life” or “the *ultimate* end in life” are strongly tilted in favor of universalism. Some would perhaps reply that these terms represent an inappropriate bias towards universalism. My counter to such objections would be to point out that universalism has always been the first choice, that people only joined the ranks of variantists (or nihilists) when they were unable to find a universal MoL and that “*the* meaning of life” is more fitting than “*a* meaning of life” or “*meanings* of life.”

Secondly, there is ‘the argument from universally same nature.’ One of the premises of this argument is that the UEiL has to properly relate to what we are (which is why a big car or a fat bank account cannot constitute to a meaningful life, because no one could possibly be their car or their bank account or, on a more general level, something purely physical). The second premise is that we all are of a universally same nature: We may have our differences about whether that nature is a more mental or a more physical one, but it would be nonsensical to assume that, say, my nature or personal identity is made up of only mental stuff and that yours on the other hand is made up of only physical stuff. The conclusion is an affirmation of the universal scope of the UEiL.

Thirdly, there is ‘the argument from universal holistic evolution’ which already anticipates the content of sect. 3. In this case, the road to universalism leads via the premises

that mind-including holistic evolution is a universal process (for all living beings) and that the UEiL is situated in the context of that universal evolutionary process, with the conclusion once again being universalism about the UEiL.

Fourthly, there is ‘the argument from universal benefit.’ Here the first premise is that we should take that general goal as the UEiL from which everyone benefits the most, ideally without creating any losers (‘the greater good without the lesser evil,’ so to speak) and without that goal somehow becoming too limiting or totalitarian. Quite on the contrary: That goal is supposed to amount to a great unifying and peace-bringing element for local or global human societies, because currently, there are different and oftentimes opposed ‘highest’ (and oftentimes quite lowly) ends being pursued by different powers acting in or on those societies, thereby creating a situation where people are often enough working against each other and hindering each other’s progress. Understanding, communication and acceptance of a universal UEiL, on the other hand, would provide people around the world with a very fundamental *common end* to pursue, i.e. with something that would make people cooperate more with each other across age-related, cultural, educational, ethnological, gender-related, linguistic, religious or other (perceived) differences or barriers. The second premise is that the UEiL of mental evolution is exactly that a goal of greatest universal benefit, and with everyone being able to massively benefit from its active and successful pursuit,¹⁹ the conclusion is once again universalism.

Fifthly, there is ‘the argument from universal morality’ (cf. the argument from the nature of morality in sect. 2.3). Here the premises for universalism are the existence or viability of a universal ethics or morality (e.g. Williams 1948, Darwall 1983, Bond 1990,

¹⁹ Cf. Wolf 2007a, 32: “open to anyone and everyone to [...] try to answer”; also cf. Wolf 1997, 212. Seen that way, one could also claim hybridivism about the category of scope, because the general answer is universal or invariant, but the specific implementation is variant. To drive home the point that there is a universal UEiL though, I will remain with the term of “(general) universalism.”

Küng 1998, Maior 2013, Melé & Sánchez-Runde 2013) and the assumption that UEiL and MoL are inherently part of or related to morality and thus also universal.

Sixthly, a highly indubitable universal UEiL does seem to exist or to be conceivable (= ‘the argument from existence’), and this would perhaps be the most obvious reason for rejecting nihilism as well as the ‘lesser nihilism’ of variantism.

3. Mental Evolution and Evolvedness

In the previous section, the general definition of the UEiL (“a highly pursuit-worthy and, especially if successfully implemented, fulfilling end that takes precedence over all other ends and that also remains this ultimate end throughout our lives”) was made more specific: While I remained relatively neutral and intentionally vague in respect to the two UEiL categories of existence and origin, the components of non-physical relation and invariant/universal scope were added to the definition in no uncertain fashion. In this section, I would like to make that definition or account as well as that of the MoL (“the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL”) even more specific by proposing that this non-physical and universal UEiL lies in “mental evolution,” a goal that I will generally define as “the continuous improvement of mental evolvedness or quality of consciousness” (for the latter term cf. Campbell 2007). Overall, readers should expect to see a discussion of the following three distinct but related items: the *process* of mental evolution and devolution as the for our purposes more important half of the process of holistic evolution and devolution, the *UEiL* of mental evolution, and gradually²⁰ as well as constantly varying degrees of *mental (d)evolvedness* in individuals and groups.

²⁰ Cf. e.g. Landau 2011, 314: “a meaningful life need not be impeccable.”

3.1 What Evolves?

In the currently widely accepted sense, the process of (d)evolution is typically still limited or reduced to organic or physical (d)evolution.²¹ But are we, the subjects and results of that ongoing process, indeed reducible to physical stuff like body, brain or genes? In my opinion and that of other non-physicalists, we are not. Instead, our existence and personal identity and that of other beings would rather seem to (also) be mind- or consciousness-based (e.g. Hume 1896/1739–40, I.IV.VI., James 1891/1890, ch. X, Noonan 1989, Campbell 2007, Olsen 2010, sect. 3–4, Weinberg 2012). Theories of evolution can accordingly not be reduced or eliminated to mere physical evolution, but will also – and perhaps even primarily – need to encompass and explain mental evolution. This if you will generally ‘holistic theory of evolution’ is not only supported by contemporaries in various versions (e.g. Jablonka & Lamb 2006, Campbell 2007, Wilson et al. 2014), but already by 19th century well-knowns such as Spencer (1855, 1857, 1861, ch. II, 1862, 1876),²² Darwin (1871),²³ Romanes (1883, 1888) or in particular someone like James 1891/1890 or Morgan (1892, 161: “The theory of organic evolution ... needs to be supplemented by a theory of mental evolution”).

The reason why James or Morgan deserve special mention here is that, as opposed to

²¹ Cf. e.g. the projects of sociobiology (Wilson 1975, Dawkins 1976; for opposition cf. Rose et al. 1990 [1984] or Kitcher 1985) or evolutionary psychology (Tooby & Cosmides 1992, Buss 1995 or Daly & Wilson 2005; for opposition cf. Looren de Jong & Van der Steen 1998, Panksepp & Panksepp 2000 or Buller 2005).

²² In Spencer 1855, there is only mention of “the evolution of a consciousness” (§100, 324 and §170, 501). In Spencer 1857, mental evolution is once again only implied or circumscribed by terms and expressions such as “the evolution of civilization” or “social evolution” (453), “the evolution of all products of human thought and action” (456), “the evolution of languages ... words, and ... speech” (457), “the evolution of Science” (464), or “the evolution of Humanity” (465). In Spencer 1861 and his later works, “mental evolution” is finally mentioned explicitly. It should perhaps also be stated that Spencer has used the term “evolution” earlier and more frequently than Darwin (an electronic word search has revealed only ten mentions of “evolution” in Darwin’s *Origin* of 1859 as well as in Darwin 1871) and that Spencer also used “evolution” in a sense that in my opinion rather inappropriately went far beyond the mental and organic/physical evolution of life (cf. Spencer 1857, 446–47).

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, I.II., 51: “To maintain ... that no animal during the course of ages has progressed in intellect or other mental faculties, is to beg the question of the evolution of species,” or *ibid.*, I.IV., 107: “In order that an ape-like creature should have been transformed into man, it is necessary that this early form, as well as many successive links, should all have varied in mind and body.”

Spencer (James 1891/1890, ch. VI., 147–49), ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ T. H. Huxley (Morgan 1892, 164) or Romanes (1883, ch. 3), James or Morgan did *not* reduce or eliminate mental existence to physical existence or mental evolution to physical evolution.²⁴ It is in this non-physicalistic sense (Campbell 2007, 663: “Consciousness is fundamental”) that both the process of evolution as well as the following proposed UEiL is to be understood.

3.2 Why Mental Evolution and Evolvedness?

The UEiL was placed in a *holistic* evolutionary context. So then why adopt *mental* evolution as the UEiL and not holistic evolution? This choice or that of an according non-physical or mental relation (sect. 2.3) is primarily a result of my take on personal identity (sect. 3.1) which, in turn, is a result of more general ontological convictions: If our identity or existence in general could be reduced to purely physical stuff, then an evolution-related UEiL could conceivably also be reduced to the ultimate goal of physical evolution. Such an ‘eugenical’ conception of an evolution-related UEiL, however, would not only be historically tainted but also metaphysically or ontologically incorrect since personal identity (Hume 1896/1739–40, I.IV.VI., James 1891/1890, ch. X, Noonan 1989, Campbell 2007, Olsen 2010, sect. 3–4, Weinberg 2012) or existence in general cannot be reduced to physical stuff just as evolution cannot be reduced to organic/physical evolution. Instead, existence, personal identity and evolution are partially or even primarily mental or mind-related (or so my claim). Any UEiL that takes into account that fundamental nature of existence, of ourselves and of a likewise (d)evolutionary process will thus also need to be partially, primarily or perhaps even exclusively mind-related, for otherwise it would be ontologically inconsistent or at odds with

²⁴ Cf. James 1891/1890, ch. VI., 149: “*If evolution is to work smoothly, consciousness in some shape must have been present at the very origin of things,*” Morgan 1892, 164: “Consciousness is something *sui generis*. It is neither matter nor energy,” or *ibid.*, 172–74.

related ontological convictions.²⁵

Regarding the general direction of the proposed UEiL of mental evolution, I would once again like to point out the connection between the MoL/UEiL and morality in the form of the direct correlation and maxim that “the more a life is moral, the more a life is meaningful” (Metz 2002, 798): I believe that this premise is true, and together with the other presumably true premise of mental evolution being that UEiL, the conclusion is that the UEiL of mental evolution is to be understood as a perhaps not exclusively but *primarily moral* mental evolution.²⁶

For the description of the current status of an individual or group in regard to the UEiL or MoL, I suggest to use the in both cases gradually sensitive terms of “quality of consciousness” (QoC; Campbell 2007) or “mental (d)evolvedness”: If such an entity is doing well in respect to the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL of mental evolution, that entity can be regarded as being of a relatively high QoC or as being relatively mentally evolved. If, on the other hand, individuals or groups are not doing well in respect to that MoL, then they can be regarded as being of a relatively low QoC or as being relatively mentally devolved or underevolved.

Note that the overall answer of mental evolution and evolvedness can also be understood as an elaboration and specification of Smuts’ good cause account of the MoL according to which “one’s life is meaningful to the extent that one promotes the good” (2013, 536). This is because the how-to is provided for by Campbell's or my own mental evolution

²⁵ By stating that the MoL is to be found in “contouring intelligence toward fundamental conditions of human life” (Metz 2013a, sect. 3.2, on Metz 2013b) and given that holistic evolution is a fundamental condition of human life, Metz in a sense also confirms Campbell’s (2007, 399: “The evolution of our individuated unit of consciousness is the point of our existence”) or my own proposed UEiL of mental evolution.

²⁶ Cf. (Metz 2003, 60–61) or Landau (2011, 314) for statements to the effect of there also being morally unrelated or neutral ways of how mental evolution can occur. That, however, does not change anything about the widely held opinion that “immoral lives cannot be meaningful” (Landau 2011, 316) or that mentally evolved individuals generally act in a morally right way.

account: One can reliably be a cause of good effects *by becoming a being of relatively high QoC* which in turn can be achieved *by actively and successfully pursuing the UEiL of mental evolution*.²⁷

3.3 Defining (Moral) Mental Evolvedness

In this chapter and after previous discussion has been about the process holistic and mental (d)evolution and moreso about the UEiL of mental evolution, I would now like to set aside those two items and concentrate solely on the third one of mental evolvedness or quality of consciousness. Since this is not only a concept but also a concrete quality in beings, I will go about this both in terms of a general ‘patchwork’-definition of that term as well as in terms of answering the question of how one can recognize the relative presence or lack of that quality in a being or ‘individuated unit of consciousness’ (IUoC).

First of all and as stated by Campbell (2007, 255, 351) or as pointed out by the philosophy of Buddhism (Rahula 1974, ch. V), the arch-philosophical quality of *wisdom* appears to be an inherent part of such (moral) mental evolvedness. This can be demonstrated by pointing out that it would be highly unfitting to regard an individual as wise and at the same time as mentally underevolved or, given that MoL and UEiL are embedded in a moral context, as wise and at the same time as immoral. Instead, the quality of wisdom always seems to imply a high degree of mental evolvedness as well as high standards of morality, thus making it a prime aspect of the definiens for the definiendum of moral mental evolvedness.

Furthermore, general *motivations* and specific *intentions* (Campbell 2007, 414) also

²⁷ Also cf. Thomas 2005, 406: “being psychologically healthy is more morally normative than one might suppose.” The premises here are that it is our moral duty or the point of our existence to do good and that being psychologically healthy – or having a high QoC – is a necessary requirement for being able to do so.

reflect an individual's QoC: If individuals are motivated to a high degree by greed, hate or other vices or 'mental poisons' (Rahula 1974) and driven by the intent to materialistically enrich themselves without end or to ruthlessly destroy other people or even entire countries (what was formerly known as Iraq, Libya or the currently failing state of Ukraine come to mind), then that points to an underevolved QoC. Mentally highly evolved individuals, on the other hand, have largely transcended these vices and are instead motivated by virtues, with specific intentions being of a likewise nature.

On a somewhat different level but relatedly, one can also point to the criteria of *awareness of choices* and *choices made*: Given the same situation, a mentally more evolved being or IUoC will be aware of better choices than a less evolved IUoC, and it will also make the better choices. This also caters to the Aristotelean concept of *akrasia* or weakness of will in the sense that one may be evolved enough to be aware of better possible choices, but not yet evolved enough or mentally too weak to actually implement those choices.

Relatedly, the degree of mental evolvedness could also be defined or explained with the aid of the category of mental order and chaos, with ordered standing for evolved and chaotic for unevolved. In this context and no doubt due to his training as a physicist, Campbell uses the term of *entropy*, with "high(er) entropy" denoting low(er) QoC and "low(er) entropy" denoting high(er) QoC (the following is essentially representative of my own opinion):

Higher entropy states within consciousness represent unprofitable organization: disorganization, fears, [...] dimness, diminished potential, self-centeredness, and an inability to understand complex interrelationships or see big pictures. Higher entropy results in consciousness systems having less power that can be applied to overcome the inertia of ignorance and ego

dysfunctionality. Not decreasing the entropy of consciousness results in a squandering of potential.

The fewer internal dysfunctional constraints [...] that limit a particular consciousness, the lower its associated entropy and the more effectively it can populate the most profitable states available to it. The drive or urge to be helpful to, and care about others (love) is an innate property of low entropy consciousness. A low entropy consciousness is an effective and powerful consciousness. (ibid., 441)

To perhaps conclude this section with a general functional definition of QoC and mental evolvedness: *A relatively low QoC is the fundamental human cause for morally and otherwise bad consequences, whereas a relatively high QoC is the fundamental human cause for morally and otherwise good consequences.* Seen that way, QoC or mental evolvedness is certainly a virtue and in my estimation most likely even the one unitarian virtue (for a discussion of the unity of virtue thesis, cf. e.g. Penner 1973, Wolf 2007b or Toner 2014).

3.4 The Importance of (Moral) Mental Evolvedness

I believe there are few things that are as impressive as consequences (of whatever). In order to drive home the importance of the active and successful pursuit of the universal UEiL of mental evolution and the according result, quality and human virtue of mental evolvedness or QoC, I would accordingly like to close with a brief outlook over the consequences of relative success and relative failure to attain that virtue. Towards that end, I will start by quoting two further passages from Campbell that are once again representative of how I would describe the situation (addition myself):

Improving the quality of our consciousness is, and always has been, fundamental to our evolution

but today it is also critical to our survival and to the continued success of the Homo sapiens experiment. If we accomplish a significant improvement in the quality of our consciousness first, if we can lead with our quality, the rest of our options will be guided by our wisdom and we will leap boldly ahead. If, on the other hand, the quality of our consciousness lags [...], we will have the cart in front of the horse, so to speak, and it is going to be a wild and dangerous ride. (Campbell 2007, 225)

On the physical side of the human coin, the Darwinian game of survival and domination of the fittest plays out in the little picture of PMR [physical matter reality, understood as subjective phenomenal reality]. In a bigger picture, humans also have an innate drive toward self-improvement that focuses on the evolution of consciousness. The fact is that in the PMR little picture, long-term success ultimately depends on establishing a balance between these two modes of human evolution.

If our drive to compete and gain controlling power and knowledge overwhelms the synergistic balance it must have with our drive to improve the quality of our consciousness, we will eventually unravel our grandest gains in a giant leap backward. If power and wisdom are not in an effective balance within any self-modifiable system (too much power relative to the wisdom needed to utilize that power for long-term profitability), that system will eventually become unstable and self-destruct in proportion to the degree of the imbalance. (ibid., 351)

In other words and as far as human influence is concerned: There is no other thing besides mental evolvedness that has or would have as many or as massively positive consequences, just as there is no other thing besides mental devolvedness or underevolvedness that has or would have as many or as massively negative consequences. Holistic (d)evolution is also a naturally occurring and ongoing process. To take “the active and successful pursuit of

(primarily) mental evolution” as the MoL thus simply means that we want to maximize positive consequences while minimizing negative consequences and that we want to do well in the process of holistic evolution instead of, say, messing things up through various non-sustainable ‘developments’ which can unfortunately be found aplenty in today’s society (sustainability is virtue and non-sustainability is vice as far as this author is concerned; cf. Prakash 1995 or van Wensveen 2001). To conclude with another fitting and fairly self-explanatory quotation from the earlier author:

The external environment for humans is essentially subdued; consequently, we have become our only major threat. The greatest challenge to our species today is to survive the self-destructiveness of our own low quality of consciousness. We must now learn to master the internal environment. (Campbell 2007, 229)

4. Conclusion

It was proposed that “(I) The universal MoL lies in the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL of mental evolution,” with the initial general definition of the UEiL being “a highly pursuit-worthy and, especially if successfully implemented, fulfilling end that takes precedence over all other ends and that also remains this ultimate end throughout our lives.” In the context of four fundamental UEiL categories, that definition was then made more specific by suggesting an inclination towards a subjective existence (sect. 2.1) and a natural origin (sect. 2.2), by decisively adding a non-physical relation (sect. 2.3) and a universal scope (sect. 2.4) to the UEiL, and by affirming that the UEiL is mainly a moral end or situated in a moral context (sect. 2.3).

In sect. 3, that definition was then rounded off by adding that mental evolution (“the

continuous improvement of mental evolvedness or quality of consciousness”) is that non-physical and universal UEiL: It was opined against a purely organic or physicalistic and in favor of a holistic conception of the process of evolution (sect. 3.1), the proposed UEiL of mental evolution as well as the according virtue of mental evolvedness or quality of consciousness were defined, explained and argued for (sects. 3.2–3.3), and the great importance of achieving a high degree of QoC was pointed out (sect. 3.4).

The question of what constitutes a meaningful life or how one can live a meaningful life can thus be answered in the following manner: If, at the end of an individual life in this world, an individual has managed to improve its own and typically also the overall QoC, thereby invariably being the cause of overall positive effects, then this can be regarded as a meaningful and morally good life, with the degree of meaningfulness and moral goodness depending on the amount and degree of QoC evolution and the positive effects caused by this. If, on the other hand, an individual should have lowered its own and typically also the overall QoC, thereby invariably being the cause of overall negative effects, then this can be regarded as an in the negative sense meaningless and morally bad life, with the amount and degree of meaninglessness and moral badness depending on the amount and degree of QoC devolution and the negative effects caused by this.

Relatedly and in terms of an outlook over future developments from this point onwards, I would be inclined to believe that (1) the unity of virtue hypothesis got confirmed here since we can take mental evolvedness to be that unitarian virtue, that (2) the MoL of the active and successful pursuit of the UEiL of mental evolution would appear to serve as one of the measures or indicators of moral goodness and badness (in the sense that something is regarded as good if it promotes mental evolution and as bad if it promotes mental devolution), and that (3) a non-physicalistic or holistic remodelling of evolutionary theory

and (4) evolutionary ethics may very well be in order. As already stated though, these are mainly topics that will need to be discussed in other works, because for the time being I simply hope that I was able to properly introduce and argue for this paper's universalistic mental evolution account of the MoL.

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