

Metz, Thaddeus. *Meaning In Life. An Analytic Study.*

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I suspect that at some point in our lives, most of us have been gripped by a deep and unsettling existential concern: What is the point of all? Why, at the end of the day, keep doing the things I do? I say the concern is deep, because the kind of answers that usually satisfy our demand for reasons – because it serves our happiness or because we owe it to someone else – do not seem to suffice to address it. Its object is what used to be called the meaning of life, and what philosophers now somewhat more modestly prefer to call meaning *in life*. Once banished as nonsense, the topic has recently been revived. Thaddeus Metz's *Meaning in Life* is the most systematic and exhaustive investigation of the issue to date with the tools of analytic philosophy.

Metz rightly begins Part I of the book, 'Meaning as One Part of a Good Life', by distinguishing between the concept of meaning in life and various conceptions of it. The concept of meaningfulness sets the terms of the inquiry: what exactly is the question that the competing views try to answer, and what counts as a good answer? Metz emphasizes two criteria for a good analysis of the concept. First, it shouldn't a priori rule out any of the main conceptions of meaning as candidate answers to the question. Second, it should distinguish meaning from other final goods, such as happiness. I believe it would be fruitful to add a third criterion: meaning is the object of the kind of existential concern I characterized in the previous paragraph. A theory that doesn't credibly address such a concern simply isn't about meaningfulness in the relevant sense.

Metz believes that his criteria are best met if meaningfulness is understood as family resemblance concept, so that there's a set of overlapping criteria: asking about meaning in life is asking about which ends, besides pleasure, are worth pursuing for their own sake, how we transcend our animal nature, or what kind of life merits great pride, esteem, or admiration (34). The final element in the list suggests a kind of fitting attitudes analysis of meaningfulness: for a life to be meaningful is for it to be fitting to find it meaningful, where finding a life meaningful comprises of certain emotional responses. I would add feelings of fulfillment, inspiration, and elevation to Metz's list. In earlier work, Metz himself defended this type of view. It is tempting to see it as the core of the concept. After all, even if we rule out pleasure and happiness, there are other ends worth pursuing for their own sake, such as justice, that are distinct from meaningfulness, so the first element is too broad. And transcending our animal nature seems more like a candidate answer to what makes a life meaningful than like a part of the analysis.

So why wouldn't fittingness of finding life meaningful suffice? Metz's main objection is that such a view would mistakenly rule out as conceptually confused the view that living in a certain sort of authentic environment or being part of a chain of generations contributes to the meaningfulness of one's life. But this is a weak objection. It presupposes that it is *a priori* that there is no pride or esteem to be had for living in such circumstances when they do not result from one's agency. But this is a substantive question – after all, it does not seem conceptually confused to take something like pride in the performance of one's national football team. And it is also open for the fitting attitudes analyst to say that such views are, after all, somewhat conceptually confused. Perhaps being part of a long lineage makes a certain kind of pride somewhat appropriate, but not the sort associated with meaning. After all, what does it have to do with the relevant kind of existential concern?

Having delineated the concept, Metz defends the sensible compromise view that both individual parts of a life and holistic relationships among them contribute to meaningfulness. As in most literature on the topic, the case for the latter is based on examples – for example, a Groundhog Day life consisting of endless repetition of projects that are in themselves meaningful is less meaningful than a life that in some sense moves forward. Metz gestures towards narrative structure as a source of holistic meaning, but offers little on the topic (for an attempt at a systematic theory, see Antti Kauppinen, “Meaningfulness and Time,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2) [2012]: 345–377).

In the final chapter of Part I, Metz contrasts meaning with pleasure and happiness. The comparison between these final goods is insightful and informative. Meaning comes from action rather than sensation and is in that sense relational. It does not depend on sheer luck, and can be influenced posthumously. Perhaps most interestingly, unlike in the case of happiness, we seem to lack what Parfit called future bias: while we’d rather have already suffered a pain than suffer it in the future, when it comes to doing something that contributes to meaning, we’re indifferent to whether we already did it or will go on to do it.

The Part II of the book is dedicated to a surprisingly thorough exploration of supernaturalist conceptions of meaning in life. According to such theories, some kind of relationship with some kind of supernatural realm – the divine, the spiritual, the soul – is necessary for meaning. The most popular view is that it is fulfilling God’s purpose that gives meaning to our lives. The strongest argument for divine purpose theory, Metz believes, is the claim that God is necessary for objective value, which in turn is necessary for meaning. Departing from convention, he all too lightly dismisses the usual Euthyphro concerns and offers a new

objection to Divine Command Theory. Roughly, he maintains that it is inconsistent to maintain the following three propositions, which contemporary theists such as John Cottingham endorse: we know that if objective moral truths exist, God exists; we know that objective moral truths exist; we don't know that God exists. It may sound odd for theists to maintain that we don't know that God exists, but as Metz points out, modest theists such as Cottingham acknowledge that observational evidence, including religious experience, doesn't suffice to show that there is a God. Metz maintains that the tension among the three propositions is best resolved by rejecting the first premise concerning the dependence of morality on God.

It seems, however, that there is room for a theist rejoinder. There's nothing to stop the theist from saying that although *other* evidence doesn't suffice for knowledge of God's existence, when we add the evidence regarding the existence of objective morality and its dependence on God, we *do* know that God exists. So instead of a dialectical argument based on commitments that the theist need not make, a naturalist needs a direct argument against the dependence of objective morality on God.

Metz does take on this challenge, too. He endorses an ambitious form of synthetic moral naturalism, according to which moral properties are a posteriori identical with physical properties. (He appears to assume that all natural properties are reducible to the physical.) Such accounts face a number of problems, the most notorious of which is perhaps accounting for the normativity of natural properties. Metz believes he has a solution. According to him, we can empirically learn that "the terms 'overriding, categorical reason not to perform actions' and 'wrongness' essentially (or largely) co-refer" (93).

This metaethical sketch is probably the weakest part of Metz's argument. Perhaps an act-type's property of being wrong is identical with the property of there being categorical reason against performing acts of that type, but this does nothing to solve the normativity problem. Being a categorical reason is itself a normative property. The real challenge for the synthetic naturalist is giving a reductive account of being a categorical reason, which Metz does not attempt. Further, Metz claims that just as water is the stuff that is actually causally responsible for our use of the term 'water', "the nature of final goodness is fixed by us upon having referred to something as 'good for its own sake'" (172). This is intolerably conservative – it is not only possible but likely that we've made mistakes in thinking that certain things are good or bad (and not just about the underlying nature of good or bad things). And I've not even mentioned familiar Moral Twin Earth concerns about the intelligibility of disagreement. Fortunately, the metaethical parts of the book are also strictly unnecessary – there are plenty of good non-theistic theories of objective value around.

The best form of supernaturalist theory, according to Metz, says that for life to be meaningful, we must respect, love, and commune with God because of his unique qualities. Underlying this is what he calls the Perfection Thesis. It says that meaning requires engaging with a "maximally conceivable value" (138), which only God possesses. Having a soul or being immortal only seem necessary for meaning because they enable such engagement with God. Metz's strategy is to grant that engaging with maximal value would indeed enhance meaningfulness, but maintain that it is not necessary for it. The basic objection is simply that it is hard to believe that the lives of paradigms of meaningfulness from Darwin to Mother Theresa wouldn't be meaningful in the absence of a supernatural realm, as long as they engage with some genuine value. Certain actions make our lives more meaningful (confer *pro tanto* meaning), and our lives are meaningful *tout court* when, roughly, their level of pro

tanto meaning is not far below the maximum a human being is likely to achieve given actual natural facts.

The task of Part III is to provide a naturalistic theory of what sorts of things confer *pro tanto* meaning and why. Metz rejects subjectivist forms of naturalism, which maintain, crudely, that our lives are meaningful when we love what we do, whatever that is. Given the falsity of value nihilism, such views fall easily to counterexample, as there are many pointless activities that are no less pointless for being wholeheartedly pursued.

This leaves objectivist naturalism, the most popular sort of view at the moment. Its best-known variant is the view defended by Susan Wolf, according to whom our lives are meaningful when we wholeheartedly and successfully engage in projects and relationships of objective worth, or more briefly, when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness (see Susan Wolf, *Meaning In Life and Why It Matters* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010]). Metz has two objections to this view. First, subjective attraction is not necessary: even if Mother Theresa is bored and disengaged from her objectively valuable work, the work contributes to the meaningfulness of her life. This seems right. But a weaker kind of subjective element might still be necessary for *pro tanto* meaningfulness: we must *aim* at the valuable things, such as producing a work of art (instead of, say, accidentally dropping several cans of paint that happen to mix up to form a masterpiece on canvas) and *actively engage* in valuable relationships. I'm not sure if Metz would disagree with this, as he rejects purely consequentialist accounts of meaning, on which all that matters is how much value we promote. Instead, he endorses a non-consequentialist position, on which how we promote value makes a difference, and there are other ways of relating to value than promotion.

Metz's second objection is that Wolf fails to provide a theory of what is in common to objectively valuable things that confer meaning. His own objective naturalist view, the Fundamentality Theory, attempts to provide such a unifying account. However, it is not clear whether it represents an advance over Wolf's view. The core thesis prior to amendments goes as follows:

(FT1) A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

This isn't easy to parse at first sight. It turns out that by "rationality", Metz means any judgment-sensitive attitudes, which for him include emotions and intentions as well as beliefs. They are "positively oriented" towards something when they include a wish that the state of affairs that is their object obtains. Positive orientation is exemplified by desiring and pursuing the object. Finally, "fundamental conditions" are "conditions that are largely responsible for many other conditions in a given domain" (226). An example may clarify this. One of the fundamental conditions of human existence is our rational nature, whose exercise is responsible for much that happens in our lives, along with our relationships with others. So, Metz says, when we use our reason in pursuit of fostering other people's use of their rational nature and good relationships, like, say, Nelson Mandela did, we add a lot to the meaning of our lives.

Other fundamental conditions have to do with our collective existence and environment. One way of positively orienting ourselves to fundamental facts about our nature and environment is seeking systematic scientific knowledge. Another way is creating a work of art that is

about “those facets of the human experience responsible for much else about the human experience” (230), as opposed to dust or excrement. In something like this way, Metz believes himself to have shown how pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful contributes to meaning in life. He then refines the theory by adding a clause for holism and for “anti-matter”: meaning is diminished when we orient ourselves *negatively* towards fundamental conditions, for example by destroying great works of art or degrading an individual. Intuitions may differ here. As I see it, doing bad things is no different from doing things of no value – whether you burn the Sistine Chapel or make a handwritten copy of a gossip website archive, you’re just wasting your time, disregarding the pleasure you get. In each case, engaging in activities that are not worth the while makes the story of your life worse, and thus reduces meaning in virtue of holistic considerations.

So what does this theory add to the industry standard view? Surprisingly little. On the subjective side, the elastic notion of positive orientation of rationality (which comprises drawing distinctions, playing games, loving, and feeling joy, among many other things) is no more systematic than the elastic notion of subjective attraction, and the latter is much more readily intelligible. And since Metz’s account doesn’t mention success, it doesn’t seem to explain why actually developing a cure for cancer contributes more to meaning than merely trying one’s best. Saying, as he does, that successful pursuit amounts to “greater positive orientation” than mere trying (232) seems like an *ad hoc* move. Where Metz does make a positive contribution is in emphasizing the need for skill, intelligence, and effort in bringing about the desired good – it really does seem to matter that Einstein didn’t discover special relativity just by pressing a button on a machine.

On the objective side, Metz's notion of fundamental conditions corresponds to the objective values that are worth promoting and respecting. Fundamentality is meant to unify the meaning-conferring values, but it turns out to be so loose an idea that there is no real explanatory payoff. Other things being equal, one activity contributes more to meaning than another if it is *more valuable*. And value isn't a function of fundamentality, except perhaps in the special case of knowledge. It is indeed plausibly better to know more rather than less fundamental truths. But it is highly implausible that aesthetic value depends on what the subject matter of the work is – as Metz himself acknowledges, not all artworks are *about* anything in the first place. Nor is moral value derivative from the explanatory fundamentality of what one's actions target. Think of a clown who gives pleasure to many children over a lifetime. This is presumably a good thing that can make the life highly meaningful, and not because the pleasure somehow deeply influences the children's lives by enabling better use of reason or some such thing. To be sure, there are Kantians who might agree that respecting and promoting rational nature is key to moral achievement. But they wouldn't accept that the value of rationality is a function of how much difference it makes to other things in our lives. Rather, it gives us dignity by making us more than a plaything of forces of nature. We had better accept that our activities can be objectively worthwhile for many reasons, many of which have little to do with anything worth calling the metaphysically fundamental conditions of human existence.

*Meaning In Life* has many good features. It is comprehensive, meticulous, and argumentative. Metz seems to have read everything anyone has ever written about the topic, and has a thoughtful opinion on every claim. There is no volume that would work better as a textbook for a class on meaningfulness. On the other hand, systematically going through every view, however silly, hardly makes for the most inspiring or enjoyable read, and many of the

original arguments fail to convince. It remains unclear whether the positive view really marks an advance over existing, more appealingly presented alternatives. In spite of Metz's Herculean effort, the kind of objective naturalist theory defended by Susan Wolf, perhaps supplemented with an account of how the holistic aspects of life contribute to meaningfulness, remains the view to beat in the field. If the existential worry I started with has an answer, it begins with the thought that I can take what experience has taught me and throw myself into projects and relationships that make a real difference to lives beyond my own and beyond the present moment.

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