

The Experience of Meaning

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Whether our lives are meaningful or meaningless, we certainly sometimes *experience* them as being one or the other. Such experiences can take many different forms. Indeed, one of the questions I will address in this chapter is whether there is a unity to all the experiences that people are apt to describe in the language of meaning. And if there are different experiences of meaning, are some more important for philosophical purposes than others?

Let me start with a passage from a classic work of literature, Ivan Turgenev's 1862 novel *Fathers and Sons*. The speakers are the young widow Odintsova, and the nihilist student Bazarov, who is in love with her and is goading her to reveal her secrets. Here's how one of their discussions goes, beginning with Odintsova's frank confession:

"I am unhappy because ... I have no desires, no passion for life. You look at me incredulously; you think that's said by an 'aristocrat,' who is all in lace, and sitting in a velvet armchair. I don't conceal the fact: I love what you call comfort, and at the same time I have little desire to live. Explain that contradiction as best you can. [...]"

Bazarov shook his head. "You are in good health, independent, rich; what more would you have? What do you want?" "What do I want," echoed Odintsova, and she sighed, "I am very tired, I am old, I feel as if I have had a very long life. Yes, I am old," she added, softly drawing the ends of her lace over her bare arms. [...] "Behind me I have already so many memories: my life in Petersburg, wealth, then poverty, then my father's death, marriage, then the inevitable tour in due order.... So many

memories, and nothing to remember, and before me, before me—a long, long road, and no goal.... I have no wish to go on.” (Chapter 17)¹

Although it's never explicitly stated, it's quite clear in the novel that Countess Odintsova's problem is that she finds her life meaningless at the advanced age of 29. All her life, she has done what she was supposed to do, but the things she has done do not add up to anything – there's “memories, but nothing to remember”. And looking ahead, there's no purpose to her activities, “no goal”. As she goes on to say, she might find satisfaction if she could interest herself strongly in something, but she just can't. What's more, it's not just her own life that feels empty to her – sometimes when she comes out of her fragrant bath, she “fall[s] to musing on the nothingness of life, the sorrow, the labour, the malice of it...” (Chapter 16). In brief, she's disoriented, bored, demotivated, and perhaps on the verge of existential anxiety. And since like most people, she is hungry for meaning, she can't be happy, in spite of being in a comfortable position to enjoy any pleasure money, status, and beauty can buy (Kauppinen 2013). For her to experience her life as meaningful, many things would have to change. As we'll see, it's becoming a kind of consensus view in psychology and philosophy that for the fullest kind of experience, she would need to feel that her choices make sense over time, that her actions have a larger purpose beyond the present, and that her existence matters beyond herself, at least to someone who matters to her.

1. Three Kinds of Experience of Meaning

While philosophers have understandably focused on the question of what it *is* and what it *takes* for our lives to be meaningful, the *experience* of meaning has been thematized in

¹ The quotations are all from Constance Garnett's translation, online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/30723/30723-h/30723-h.htm>.

psychology in particular. It should therefore be fruitful to begin by looking at the different accounts in psychology.

While it is common for psychologists to say that they study meaningfulness or meaning in life or personal meaning, it is more accurate to describe their work as investigating the impact of various things on people's experience or sense of meaning, as well as correlations between the experience of meaning and other things. In recent years, psychologists working on these issues have made several attempts to clarify the object of their research. A tripartite classification of experiences of meaning has emerged in this literature. Here are some representative summaries:

We define MIL [meaning in life] as the extent to which one's life is experienced as making sense, as being directed and motivated by valued goals, and as mattering in the world. (George and Park 2016, 206)

Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos. (King et al. 2006, 180)

[W]e thus define meaning in life as emerging from the web of connections, interpretations, aspirations, and evaluations that make our experiences comprehensible, direct our efforts toward desired futures, and provide a sense that our lives matter and are worthwhile. (Martela and Steger 2016, 538)

These definitions are naturally read as saying that there are three components to a unified experience of meaning. But it is also clear that these experiences can and do come apart, as Frank Martela and Michael Steger (2016), in particular, rightly emphasize – you can find your life intelligible without finding it significant, for example. Perhaps we can say that no

one *fully* experiences their life as being meaningful without all of them. (I'll come back to this below.)

The three main varieties that psychologists have focused on, then, are experiences of 1) *making sense*, or *intelligibility*, or *coherence*, which have to do with finding patterns and connections, 2) *purpose*, or orientation toward goals felt to be valuable, and 3) *significance* or *matter*ing, or making a positive difference in the world. Psychologists recognize that these experiences have cognitive, motivational, and affective elements (Reker and Wong 2012, 435), but don't agree on what these elements are. I will next make my own proposal concerning what is involved in these different kinds of experience, drawing on philosophy as well as psychology.

2. Making Sense, Purpose and Resonance, and Significance

Making Sense

Many kinds of thing can make sense or fail to do so. Sentences, utterances, and gestures can be meaningful and random strings of numbers meaningless. There might be distinctive experiences associated with meaning in this sense – think of the moment when it dawns to you what the perfectly grammatical English sentence “Fish fish fish fish fish” says, or the bafflement that precedes the correct parsing – but they are not experiences of meaning in life, contrary to what psychologists sometimes suggest.² No one can seriously claim that you can't find *your life* meaningless as long as you get what people mean by what they say.

We might also say that an inane plot twist in a movie, or a young, healthy person suddenly dying of a stroke, doesn't make sense, or that going to a fancy restaurant to celebrate a victory does. In such cases, there is an expected *pattern* or a cultural script into

² For very broad uses of meaning-talk, see Baumeister 1991 and Thomas 2019.

which the events and actions either fit or don't. When things fit into an expected pattern, we can give a kind of an *explanation* for why things are as they are: she went into the restaurant to celebrate, because when people succeed in something important, they typically want to enjoy the good things in life and share the joy with friends. When psychologists talk about "meaning-making", they often mean finding (real or imagined) patterns in our environment. For example, Steven Heine, Travis Proulx, and Kathleen Vohs say that people are "meaning-makers, driven to make connections, find signals in noise, identify patterns, and establish associations in places where they may not inherently exist" (2006, 89).

However, there are two major reasons why we should distinguish sense-making in general from experiences of meaning in life. First, while some have found that even experiencing coherent rather than discordant perceptual stimuli is linked to increased sense of meaning in life as measured by self-report (Heintzelman and King 2014), the connection is merely *causal*. Just as with symbols, I can find my environment intelligible without *thereby* finding *my own life* meaningful. For example, if I'm sitting on the couch watching a reality show on the TV, I certainly get the meaning of what is shown and said, and find my own activity intelligible as the sort of thing people in my culture are expected to engage in to relax, but none of this amounts to experiencing my own life as meaningful. To be sure, if my world doesn't make any sense to me, it's unlikely that my life will, but they are still two different things.

Second, it is arguably possible for me to find even my own life *intelligible* in the sense of fitting with expectations or forming recognizable patterns without yet experiencing it as meaningful in any way. Maybe it seems to me that the various things that make it up are related to each other as might be expected in the light of my aims and cultural context. The things I do fit together nicely – they're mutually supportive and coherent, and my life isn't fragmented or incoherent (George and Park 2016). Perhaps, as Joshua Seachris (2009) and

Helena de Bres (2018) have argued, I have come to see my life in this way by way of forming the right kind of self-narrative, by “selecting, distilling, ordering, and unifying” my life’s events in a story I tell myself and others, drawing on local conventions (de Bres 2018, 557; cf. Rosati 2013). Still, however, what I have done might not make sense to me. Countess Odintsova is not the only person who has done what she was supposed to do, and yet fail to see the *point* of it.

The problem with the thin sort of intelligibility linked to patterns and expectations is that not just any sort of explanation will do to make the *right kind* of sense. For example, if I don’t value learning or whatever instrumental benefits college may offer, it *doesn’t* make sense for me to go to college, even if it is perfectly *intelligible* to me and everyone else why someone like me – with my social background and high school grades etc. – would go to college. For my life to properly make sense to me, I must regard my activities as contributing to or realizing something I consider *desirable* or worthwhile, as Elizabeth Anscombe (1957, 70 ff.) emphasized. Philosophers of action talk here about a *rationalizing explanation*, which is a source of a distinctive kind of understanding.³ For example, it makes sense for me to go to college, if I regard learning as valuable for its own sake, and it makes sense for me to study at the library, given that I’m a student. There is something that *justifies* and doesn’t merely causally explain what I do. When the justification takes the form of showing later actions as worthwhile in the light of earlier ones (or *vice versa*), it merits being called a *narrative justification*. This is important to emphasize, since it makes clear why even meaning-in-life-as-sense-making is not the same kind of thing as intelligibility in general.⁴

³ See, for example, Davidson 1963 and O’Brien 2019.

⁴ When Martela and Steger (2016, 536) describe intelligibility as ‘descriptive’ and ‘value-neutral’, they overlook this difference between the kind of intelligibility involved in our lives making sense to us and the intelligibility of predictable patterns.

What if my life doesn't make sense to me? The opposite of meaning as intelligibility is *disorientation* – I don't know what my life is about, or why I do what I do. I can't answer the question "Why am I doing this/have done these things?" to my own satisfaction. Since much of what we do makes sense in the light of cultural frameworks, major changes in cultural circumstances can bring about large-scale disorientation. Consider here Jonathan Lear's (2008) description of what happened to the members of Crow nation, who were nomadic hunters and warriors until 'the buffalo went away' and they were forced to live on a reservation in the late 19th century. As a result, the framework of meanings in the light of which people's aspirations and individual actions made sense collapsed.⁵ Where one once had to be either a warrior or a coward, neither was now a live option – one could neither be a success nor a failure by the traditional yardsticks. It's no wonder if the surviving Crow experienced a sense of meaninglessness. They were at a loss about how to proceed in a way that would be a sensible continuation of what they had done before – they struggled to find a narrative justification. On an individual level, the loss of a loved one may cause similar disorientation – suddenly, it no longer makes sense for me to go on as before, since the person for whose sake I did things is no longer there.

Purpose and Resonance

When psychologists talk about having *purpose* in life, they mean something like "a sense of core goals, direction in life, and enthusiasm regarding the future" (George and Park 2013, 371). When we feel like our lives have purpose (or, sometimes, *a* purpose), we feel like there is some goal in the light of which we have reason to go on and do what serves the realization

⁵ As Lear puts it, in earlier times "Every meal was in effect the cooking-of-a-meal-so-that-those-who-ate-it-would-be-healthy-to-hunt-and-fight. At a certain point, though, hunting and fighting have become impossible. Indeed, they cease to be intelligible acts." (2006, 40)

of that goal. The thought is something like “I am here to X, and I’m going to X”. Clearly, the aims that give rise to this kind of feeling are at a high level in the hierarchy of our aims – they are ends to which many other things we do are means, like taking care of a youth sports team or guarding a border. This is unquestionably an experience of meaning in life in the sense that philosophers, too, are interested in.

Sense of purpose is most clearly manifest in motivation, in feeling energetic and optimistic in pursuit of our goals, in feelings of flow, and in the belief that our aims give reasons for actions that serve them. As Susan Wolf puts it, we are “gripped, excited, interested, and engaged” (2010, 9). Cheshire Calhoun (2018) highlights the experience of what I’ll call *resonance* that seems to be closely related to purpose, but nevertheless distinct. She emphasizes that we spend a lot of time doing things that we feel we *have to* do or do for the sake of doing something rather than nothing (2018, 15 ff.). This includes activities that we find purposeful, if we’d rather skip them. In what I call the *resonance* sense, we experience our activities as meaningful only when we do things that we regard as worthwhile to include in our lives *for their own sake*. Calhoun emphasizes that they need not be life-shaping projects or commitments, but simply ways of spending time we regard ourselves as having personal reason to engage in for their own sake – what resonates with us may be watching a movie or carving a statue of a god. We might say that such activities are from our personal perspective purposeful in a *self-justifying* way, not in terms of a future goal.

In addition to these feelings that are linked to specific aims and values we have, there is also a much deeper kind of feeling that is also plausibly related to finding life purposeful. It is what Matthew Ratcliffe (2013) calls radical hope, a species of what he labels “existential feeling”. Such feelings, often vague and unnamed, are not directed toward particular objects but toward kinds of *possibilities* that matter to us, and thus shape how the world appears to us. So when I have the attitude of radical hope, I experience it as possible to do *something*

that matters, independently of the particular purposes I now happen to have. Using a different language for what is likely the same phenomenon, Calhoun talks about *taking a globally motivating interest* in one's future, which is manifest in having *basal hope* (2018, 52).

One reason to focus on existential feelings in this context is that they play an important role in relevant experiences of meaninglessness. This is manifest in at least some cases of depression. As Ratcliffe describes it, for the depressed person, the horizon of possibilities surrounding objects and activities changes: "What is lacking from the world of depression is not simply the anticipation and/or experience of pleasure, but a sense that there could be *meaningful* change, change of a kind that matters" (Ratcliffe 2014, 66, emphasis in the original). It's not just that one thinks one will fail in one's aspirations, but that there's no point in aspiring to anything, since one's sense of the possibility of a better future has shrunk or vanished. This is, of course, an extreme case. One might lack a sense of purpose with respect to a particular area or aim – for example, going to school might seem pointless to someone who at the same time is excited about playing in a band. Experiences of meaninglessness would then be localized. A different sort of local experience of *boredom* may result when one does something *only* as a means to an end, even a valued end, or only because one has to kill time for one reason or another, rather than as a way of engaging positively with what resonates with one (Calhoun 2018, 136–144).

Significance

Experiences of *significance* have traditionally been central to philosophical accounts of meaning in (or 'of') life. As the term is used in this context, significance refers to making a positive difference beyond one's own life. Sometimes this is put in terms of "connecting to something larger", but as many have observed, what is at issue is rather a sense of

contributing to some *value* beyond ourselves (Nozick 1981, 611; Wolf 2010, Martela 2017).⁶ And not just any value, either – when we think of our lives as significant, we think of ourselves as promoting or realizing some value that is both *final* (that is, not valuable merely as a means to something else) and *objective* (that is, not just something we happen to value but which anyone has reason to value). It is also common to think that significance requires the value to be *lasting* beyond the individual moment or even life. What’s more, for me to feel that *my* life is significant, I must also think that it matters that *I* am doing it, and not someone else. This explains why *creative* achievements tend to generate experiences of significance – after all, insofar as what I do is creative, there’s something unique and irreplaceable to my contribution.⁷

Further, I don’t get a sense of significance if I bring something good about by accident or without particular effort. For example, if I lose control of my car and end up killing a dictator, thus improving millions of lives, it’s not something that gives me comfort if I worry about the point of my existence. Thus, sense of significance is also associated with acting purposefully and non-trivial exercise of our capacities. And finally, we don’t find our activities as personally meaningful if we are *alienated* from what we do – if our heart isn’t in it, however valuable the outcome may be. So I must feel I can be who I really am while doing something that has value. This is one reason why close personal relationships are typically so important to the experience of meaning. When I open up to another person and feel that they cherish what we do together and value me as the unique person I am, I feel that I really matter to someone I think really matters. This is a way to make a contribution to value

⁶ Or, perhaps, beyond our *animal* self, as Thaddeus Metz (2013, 29) has it – maybe displaying extraordinary integrity, say, is enough to warrant a sense of significance.

⁷ On creative achievements, see Kauppinen (forthcoming). The creativity in question need not be artistic, of course – it could be a new way of delivering breech babies, for example. Also, it may be worth emphasizing that evidently experiences of significance can also result from non-creative grunt work that someone just has to do, as long as we think it is genuinely worth doing.

beyond the self, even if it isn't world-historical significance. Perhaps we could sum up these observations by saying that experienced significance involves thinking that our authentic self is expressed by actions that non-accidentally promote or realize something of value beyond our own good.

What is it to *experience* my life or activities as being significant beyond my own good? I believe that it is not in the first instance to *believe* that one is making a positive difference. Indeed, we might even believe that our lives are significant without *experiencing* that they are. That's because the experience consists in the first instance of emotions that construe our activities as contributing to objective value. They include feelings of *fulfilment* and *pride*. Feelings of fulfilment and gratification seem to be associated especially with meaningful relationships, in which we find our worth affirmed by people who matter to us. Pride, more specifically *agential* pride in contrast to merely associative pride, has to do with what we regard as praiseworthy achievements.⁸ The thought involved in this kind of pride is that what we've done or are doing meets or exceeds some demanding standards for something of objective value in virtue of exercising our capacities, so that we are praiseworthy for what we've done (and not merely lucky to have brought about something good) (Kauppinen 2017). In having such feelings when we contemplate our lives as a whole or its defining moments, then, we affectively construe our lives as having meaning in the sense of significance.

What about experiences of lacking significance? As with purpose, it's useful to distinguish here between local and global experiences. In the local case, you feel that what you actually do doesn't contribute to anything of objective value or doesn't matter to anyone

⁸ Psychologists like Jessica Tracy and Richard Robins (2007) further distinguish between what they call 'hubristic' pride, which involves the thought that the cause of the achievement is something stable and uncontrollable within us, like some innate ability, and 'authentic' pride, which involves the thought that it is something specific that is under direct voluntary control, such as effort.

who matters, either because you fail to realize your goals, or you think that your goals themselves are not worthwhile. This is consistent with thinking that there are other activities that would be significant, and that other people are doing significant things. In the latter case, the feeling involved in the experience could be agential shame or other feelings of failure – you’re the one wasting their life while others do great things. In the global case, in contrast, the experience is a kind of existential feeling involving the thought that it’s not even *possible* for your activities to contribute to objective value or even to the good of someone who genuinely matters, because there *is* no such thing or person. This is the kind of *Angst* or dread or generalized sense of futility that is a staple of what we sometimes call existential crises. You think of the vastness of space and time and the barely noticeable role that you play in the general scheme of things – from the perspective of the universe as a whole, what difference would it make if you had never existed? And what’s more, it’s not just you who are mortal, but also everyone you care about, so all your actions will soon enough vanish without a trace.

What these thoughts of cosmic or historical insignificance do is best understood in terms of their impact on the value of our activities: whatever we do, we can’t bring about anything whose value would be important enough in the grand scheme of things to justify our existence. A shortcut to the same conclusion is embracing value nihilism, the thought that nothing is objectively valuable, which often seems to go together with the thought that there is no divine or supernatural order in which we have a place. Conversely, if we think we can achieve something of sufficient objective or at least intersubjective value in spite of our finitude, existential angst is reduced – indeed, according to the Terror Management Theory in psychology, it is to avoid such experiences that we construct and subscribe to cultural worldviews such as religions that promise us a place at the center of the grand view of things (Greenberg and Arndt 2012).

3. Is There a Unity to Experiences of Meaning?

Here is a table summarizing my proposal of what the three distinct kinds of experience of meaning in life amount to:

<i>Dimension</i> Experience type	<i>Sense-making:</i> <i>contribution to a</i> <i>subjectively</i> <i>desirable pattern</i>	<i>Purpose and</i> <i>resonance:</i> <i>contribution to aims</i>	<i>Significance:</i> <i>contribution to value</i> <i>beyond the self</i>
Experience of meaning	Belief in or feeling of narrative justification or rationalizing explanation	Enthusiastic future- or present-oriented motivation and seeing aims as source of reasons against the background of basal hope	Feelings of fulfilment and pride, beliefs about objective or intersubjective value of efforts
Experience of meaninglessness	Disorientation	Demotivation, boredom, depression	Angst, feelings of failure

These experiences can and frequently do come apart. Yet it is also easy enough to see links between them. The first thing to emphasize that all of these experiences have to do with *agency*. Experiences of meaning in life result from how we view the past, present, and future exercises of our own agency. In this respect, they contrast with, say, pleasure, with respect to which we may be purely passive. Second, they all involve some sort of *positive evaluation* of our activity. When our activities make sense to us, we regard our investment as somehow justified in the light of our personal narrative. When they're purposeful, they serve a major end we have. And we see them as significant, they make something beyond our lives better.

Third, I've tried to describe some of the central emotions and moods involved in these experiences, and it's clear that they are distinct from each other. Still, since affective states plausibly have several components, what I've said leaves it possible that "though distinct in some ways, experiences of coherence, purpose, and significance may share the same feeling state", as Samantha Heintzleman and Laura King put it (2014, 162). The question of whether there is such a *quale* is very difficult to settle, as we might expect, given that there's no

agreement even on whether there is a single sensation in common to all pleasurable experiences (Feldman 2004, Bramble 2013). In any case, experiences of meaning involve *positive feelings*. It is therefore unsurprising that rating well on one or another self-report scale of meaning in life is linked with high levels of life satisfaction, positive affect and physical health, and low levels of depression, among other things (for a summary, see Steger 2018).

One of the key questions that the plurality of experiences of meaning raises is how they are related to each other and whether some are more fundamental than others. My suggestion is that there is indeed a kind of hierarchy among them, at least insofar as we're rational. Roughly, the picture is as follows. When we are immersed in our ordinary activities, they *make sense* to us by default. What we do fits together with other things we do and have done, and is justified by this connection. But occasionally we take a step back from this immersion, perhaps because something goes wrong or we can't fit everything together. We're then led to ask about the bigger *purpose* of what we do – how they relate to what we aspire to in our lives. As Will Crescioni and Roy Baumeister put it, the sort of “existentially meaningful life stories” in the light of which our lives make sense “depict actions and decisions as following from important, stable values and contributing to the fulfillment of one or more crucial goals” (2013, 3). There seems to be a kind of negative dependence of sense-making on purpose: if we don't see our activities as serving some larger purpose, once the issue has been thematized for us, they don't make sense to us.

The same sort of dialectic then repeats itself on a higher level. Normally, even if we're led to ask about larger purposes, once we are clear on how what we do serves a purpose or resonates in itself with our values, we experience our lives as meaningful. But it is also possible that our purposes turn out to conflict, or doubts about them are raised in some other way. Then we take a further step back and reflect on those purposes themselves. Are

they really worth the investment we're making in them? Is there sufficient value in bringing them about, either for the world in general or for someone who matters to us? Do they express who we really are? Again, if we answer in the negative, the feelings echo down the chain: if I experience what I do as having insufficient significance, I'm demotivated or depressed, and consequently it ceases to make sense to me.

According to this picture, then, there is a sense in which experiences of significance are the most fundamental kind of experience of meaning. This is good news for philosophers, who have traditionally focused precisely on questions related to significance. If there is anything like *the* experience of meaning, it is the experience of the significance of our existence, in the light of which our particular projects appear as purposeful (and the activities we're engaged in resonate with us), and our lives make sense. Yet in another way, we can also say that experiences of sense-making are most fundamental, since they are part and parcel of our everyday activities, while feelings of significance tend to arise only on special occasions. We could hardly experience our lives as significant if we didn't also think that they make sense. So in different ways, both philosophers and psychologists have been getting their priorities right.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have been drawing on philosophical and psychological literature to categorize and characterizes three different kinds of experience of meaning in life: sense-making, purpose and resonance, and significance. They appear to be unified by focus on agency, positive evaluation, and positive affect. Their mutual dependence comes to light when we disengage from our ordinary immersion in activity step by step.

The last question I want to broach concerns the implications of the *variety* of experiences of meaning for philosophical questions about meaning in life. One

straightforward way in which the two might be connected is provided by the idea that for a life to *be* meaningful is for experiences of meaning to be *fitting* towards it (Kauppinen 2012). If we accept this idea, and also accept that there are *many* kinds of experience of meaning, it follows that our lives can be said to be meaningful in different ways – that is, when they *really* make sense, have a purpose or resonate with us, or have significance. This offers a possible way of reconciling competing views on what makes life meaningful. When Helena de Bres (2018) and Joshua Thomas (2019) say it is intelligibility that makes life meaningful, and Cheshire Calhoun (2018) says that it’s activity we value for its own sake, and Susan Wolf (2010) and Thaddeus Metz (2013) say that it is something like subjective engagement with objective value or positive orientation of rationality towards the fundamental conditions of human existence, they could *all* be right about meaning, albeit in different senses. The remaining question, then, would be whether one of these ways of being meaningful is the most fundamental. This question can’t be settled here, though given that significance is at issue in paradigmatic existential crises and concerns, there’s at least some reason to think that it is the philosophically most basic issue.

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