



Is Meaning in Life Constituted by Value or Intelligibility?

Iddo Landau

To cite this article: Iddo Landau (2021) Is Meaning in Life Constituted by Value or Intelligibility?, *Philosophical Papers*, 50:1-2, 211-234, DOI: [10.1080/05568641.2021.1898288](https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2021.1898288)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2021.1898288>



Published online: 01 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 62



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Is Meaning in Life Constituted by Value or Intelligibility?

Iddo Landau

Abstract: Several authors have recently argued that intelligibility, rather than value, constitutes life's meaning. In this paper I criticize the intelligibility view by offering examples of cases in which intelligibility and meaningfulness rates do not coincide. I show this for both meaning *in* life and meaning *of* life; under both naturalist and supernaturalist assumptions; and in ways relevant to subjectivists, objectivists, and hybridists. I show why the value view is not, in fact, vulnerable to several putative counterexamples to it, and I explain why, if value rather than intelligibility constitutes meaningfulness, there are so many cases in which intelligibility and meaningfulness rates do coincide. Finally, I explain why various arguments for the intelligibility view fail to show that it is advantageous to the value view.

In a recent paper, Thaddeus Metz (2019) criticizes what might be called *the intelligibility view* of life's meaning, that is, the view that takes intelligibility, rather than value, to primarily constitute or determine the meaningfulness of meaningful lives (Thomas 2019; Repp 2018; Seachris 2019). Metz presents helpful arguments against the intelligibility view, but since his paper also deals with many other issues in meaning in life research, its discussion of the intelligibility view is relatively brief. The aim of the present paper, which is influenced by Metz's claims, is to advance a more systematic and deep critique of the intelligibility view than hitherto suggested and cope with the arguments some of its main supporters present.¹ I argue that there are good reasons to conclude that the intelligibility view does not hold and that it is value that constitutes life's meaningfulness.

1 I focus here on Thomas (2019), Repp (2018), and Seachris (2019). For reasons of space, I cannot discuss here some other strong and interesting intelligibility accounts such as Alan Goldman's (2018, 116–51).

1.

Supporters of the value view corroborate their value-based accounts by presenting examples in which meaningfulness rates match rates of valued aspects in life: when the degree of the valued aspects is high, so is meaningfulness; and when the degree of valued aspects is low, so is meaningfulness (see, e.g., Landau 2017, 6–16; Metz 2013, 220–239; Wolf 2010, 13–33; Kauppinen 2012, 353–356, 361–367; Taylor 2008, 134–137, 140–142). For example, some people who lose their job or a loved one say that they cease to see their lives as meaningful. A plausible interpretation of this is that they had some aspects of value in their lives, these aspects of value are now gone, and this is why they cease to see their lives as meaningful. Often, such people say that if other aspects of life that they find valuable would emerge (e.g., dedication to a social cause, religious faith, another love), their lives would be meaningful again.

However, supporters of the intelligibility view also corroborate it by presenting examples in which meaningfulness rates match intelligibility rates, so that when intelligibility is high, so is meaningfulness, and when intelligibility is low, so is meaningfulness. This can even be done with the very examples presented above: people who, after having lost a job or a loved one, say that they cease to see their lives as meaningful often also convey a sense of incomprehension or disorientation. Things frequently seem to stop being clear to them, and they are perplexed. They often ask questions such as ‘Why did this happen to me?’ and ‘How could this be justified?’ Sometimes they also ask about ‘the point of it all’ or ‘the reason for all this’, and say that things stopped making sense to them or that they do not understand (although it is not always clear to them what precisely it is that they do not understand). Some also mention alienation, which could be seen as a form of unfamiliarity with what is happening. And they seem to hold that if things would make sense to them, or if they would cease being puzzled or alienated, they would again find their lives meaningful. This, of course, supports the intelligibility view.

There is a problem with many of the examples that both supporters of the intelligibility view and supporters of the value view present in order

to corroborate their views: lives that show high meaningfulness rates in these examples often show both high intelligibility rates *and* high value rates, and lives that show low meaningfulness rates often show both low intelligibility rates *and* low value rates. Thus, these examples do not help us decide between the value view and the intelligibility view. In order to decide between them, we should try to find cases in which meaningfulness is high while either intelligibility or value is low, or cases in which meaningfulness is low while either intelligibility or value is high. The incongruence between the rate of meaningfulness and the rate of either intelligibility or value would suggest that either intelligibility or value is not what constitutes life's meaningfulness. We should also examine whether factors other than value or intelligibility (e.g., purpose) constitute life's meaningfulness, and how to position them *vis-à-vis* intelligibility and value.

I have not found any counterexamples to the value view. Meaningfulness and value do not just partly correlate: with no exception, whenever meaningfulness is high, so is value; and whenever meaningfulness is low, so is value. This suggests that meaningfulness is determined by or constituted by value. But I did find counterexamples to the intelligibility view, that is, cases of incongruence between meaningfulness and intelligibility rates. This suggests that meaningfulness is not determined by or constituted by intelligibility. I believe that the examples and counterexamples presented ahead correspond with common intuitions shared by almost all readers and do not follow atypical understandings of meaningfulness.

Before presenting counterexamples to the intelligibility view, however, I should distinguish between Thomas's and Repp's conceptions of intelligibility. For Thomas (2019, 1555), 'asking for the meaning of X's life is an analogous request for the information necessary to make sense of that life'. Moreover, when we

want our lives to have a meaning ... we want them to have an intelligible origin, impact, purpose, or story, and when we ... want them to be meaningful ... we want them to be both rich and intelligible in one or more of these respects. (2019, 1575)

The degree of life's intelligibility (which Thomas calls 'sensefulness') is impacted both by the richness of what is comprehended and by its clarity and coherence (2019, 1567–1568). For Repp (2018, 404), on the other hand, 'a meaningful life is one that is rich in perceived sign meaning'. 'Sign meaning' includes much of what would usually be called intellectual or cognitive content and activity. Sign meaning comprises, but is not limited to, the meaning of symbols. Bodily gestures, artworks, and natural facts also have sign meaning in the sense that they, too, indicate or 'tell' us something (408). Likewise, understanding visual art or music is an act of seeing/hearing what they indicate or 'tell' us. Some things (e.g., poems) have more sign meaning than others (e.g., instruction manuals). Some people perceive more things than others do, and some people also extract more meaning than others do from what they perceive (407). People's lives are containers of experiences that can indicate or tell things to them (410–411), and different lives show different degrees of sign meaning and, thus, of meaningfulness (412).²

Thus, Thomas (2019) measures the intelligibility rate of a life by the extent to which that life is explainable and presents a comprehensible 'story'. Repp (2018), on the other hand, measures the intelligibility rate of a life by the number and quality of the cognitive experiences in that life. A life can be highly intelligible in Thomas's but not in Repp's sense if we can explain well what happened in it with our psychological, psychiatric, educational, sociological, historical, economic, religious, etc., theories (that is, if we can tell a comprehensible story of that life), even if that life includes only few and not very rich cognitive experiences. A life can be highly intelligible in Repp's but not in Thomas's sense if it includes many rich cognitive experiences even if we cannot explain well how it developed

2 Repp (2018, 415) presents various 'reasons for preferring it [his model] to competing theories' and discusses its advantage in not having some of the unattractive features of other accounts (416). However, towards the end of his paper he also notes that he does not 'insist that the correct account of life meaning is some sign account. More modestly, I suggest only that sign accounts deserve more serious consideration than they have received' (2018, 425).

to be so or tell a rational story about it. I will first present counterexamples to a Thomas-type intelligibility view and then move to counterexamples to a Repp-type intelligibility view.

2.

Consider the case of Adrian, a well-educated and intelligent person who suffers from long fits of *ennui* or world-weariness. He despises himself, his late parents, and all other people. He does not do much with his life, living off the inheritance he received when his parents passed away. In the meantime, he amuses himself by hacking cellular phones; stealing from them private, intimate pictures, and posting the pictures on the internet without the victims' knowledge. Thus, he lives in emotional and personal sleaze. A second counterexample is that of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the protagonist of Camus's (1991) *The Fall*, who left his life as a jurist in Paris (because he believed that he was always pretending there) to be a bar rat in sordid Amsterdam bars. He cares for no cause or person, detests everyone and everything, including himself, does not help anyone, and does not create anything.

Adrian and Clamence seem to have lives of low meaningfulness. However, suppose that all our psychological, sociological, economic, etc. theories explain Adrian's and Clamence's lives very well. Suppose that our psychological, sociological, etc. theories, which could be even more advanced than those we have today, render everything in Adrian's and Clamence's lives very, or even completely, comprehensible (and more comprehensible than the highly meaningful lives of, for example, Shakespeare, Beethoven, or Martin Luther King, Jr.). We are still likely to hold Adrian's and Clamence's lives to be of low meaningfulness.³ We will hold them to be so, I suggest, because we do not find them to be of sufficient value.

³ Thomas argues that such lives have a low intelligibility rate because 'it makes less sense to lead a life one finds no worth in' (2019, 1574). However, Adrian and Clamence could sensibly refrain from suicide because they believe that things might improve in the future.

Some of those who support a Thomas-type intelligibility view may wish to emphasize more the story or narrative aspect of intelligibility and reply that Adrian's life, as presented above, does not seem to have a clear narrative. However, Clamence's life does, as Camus is a good literary author, and *The Fall* is an excellent literary work. It would also be possible to flesh out more details about Clamence's life. A talented writer could also write a comprehensive narrative of Adrian's life, full of details about how the various episodes in it lead to each other, until we have a full, good story of his meaningless life. I submit that this would still not make Adrian's and Clamence's lives meaningful. The narratives could be of slow decline from bad to worse, or even of improvement from an extremely meaningless life to a less meaningless, but still insufficiently meaningful, life. Such narratives would not make these lives meaningful because not only meaningfulness, but also meaninglessness, are intelligible, and both progress and decline are amenable to narrativity.

What has been shown for Thomas-type intelligibility holds also for Repp-type intelligibility. Suppose that Adrian is extremely smart, knowledgeable, and active intellectually. He thinks and comprehends incessantly, although not enjoying it, partly out of nervousness (just as some people talk or eat incessantly out of nervousness) and partly because, from an early age, his alienated parents insinuated to him that they might love him a little more if he excelled intellectually. Thus, intense, incessant thinking has now become for him an obsessive habit, another aspect of his personality that he hates.⁴ I suggest that Adrian's life has a low meaningfulness rate but a high (Repp-type) intelligibility rate. Camus portrays Clamence, too, as very intelligent, perceptive, and sensitive. Again, we have here a case of high intelligibility but low meaningfulness. As in other thought experiments, here too we can play with the examples more, by making Adrian

4 Repp claims that to have high-quality cognitive experiences one must be interested in or care about what one understands (2018, 412–413; see also 422). I suggest that this psychological generalization is incorrect. As many good but frustrated lawyers, accountants, and students know, it is possible to be uninterested in, alienated from, and even despise what one is meticulously thinking about and understanding well.

and Clarence even more perceptive and intellectually active but their lives even more bereft of meaning and value. It is easy to think of counterexamples to the Repp-type intelligibility view, because not only stupid people can have meaningless lives. Clever and intellectually active people who have emotional problems can have meaningless lives, too. Note that these two counterexamples hold for subjectivists about meaning in life (e.g., Ayer 1990, 189–196; Trisel 2002, 79), objectivists about meaning in life (e.g., Smuts 2013; Bramble 2015), and hybridists about meaning in life (e.g., Wolf 2010, 13–33; May 2015, 50–59), since Adrian's and Clarence's lives are of low meaningfulness both in subjective feelings or self-judgment and in their actions in the external world.

Up to now I have exemplified the incongruence between meaningfulness and intelligibility with instances of low meaningfulness and high intelligibility. But the incongruence can also be exemplified with cases of high meaningfulness and low intelligibility. Consider Repp-type intelligibility first this time. Metz (2019, 410) presents the example of a mystical life that many would take to be highly meaningful. To elaborate on the example, suppose that this is a Zen master who regularly experiences powerful mystical, ineffable enlightenments characterized (paradoxically and somewhat incorrectly, as they are ineffable) by bliss, tranquility, balance, and serenity. In these ineffable mystical experiences, there are no distinctions, including those between self and world; subject and object; and past, present, and future. Hence, in the ineffable mystical condition there is also no place for conceptualization, categorization, or rationality (Suzuki 1979). Yet, those who experience or write about Zen enlightenments consider them to be highly meaningful. Thus, a mystic dedicating himself almost exclusively to such experiences may have a meaningful life that lacks rich and sophisticated Repp-type cognitive experiences. This would be a life of high meaningfulness and low intelligibility.

A second example of high meaningfulness and low intelligibility that Metz (2019, 411) presents is of a person who happens to walk by a house on fire and notices through the flames a child trapped inside and crying for help. To elaborate on the example, suppose that the flames are high,

that the child is certain not to be able to save himself without help, and that entering the burning house in order to try to save the child is extremely dangerous. Immediately, without considering the matter, the person runs into the house and rescues the child. Most would hold that this is a meaningful deed that makes life meaningful. But suppose that the rescuer did not think about what she did before or while doing it: she just rushed in. Moreover, it may be that later, when asked about it, she even says that she does not understand her behavior in view of the great danger for herself. Again, we have a case of high meaningfulness and low intelligibility. We can add to Metz's examples that the mystic guides other people in the mystical way and that the rescuer, although not understanding how or why she acted as she did, feels fulfillment because of that act. Thus, these examples, too, will hold for subjectivists, objectivists, and hybridists.

With small changes, the examples above are relevant also for Thomas-type intelligibility. Suppose that both the mystic and the rescuer have had lives that we cannot explain or comprehend well with any of our psychological, sociological, economic, etc. theories. We do not understand why they lived as they lived or how they came to do what they did. Nor can we tell comprehensible and good stories about these lives or deeds. We would still take the lives, or the deeds, to be highly meaningful.⁵

3.

I have shown the incongruence between intelligibility and meaningfulness under naturalistic suppositions. However, Seachris (2019, 376–377), Repp (2018, 414–415, 417), and Thomas (2019, 1565–1567, 1569, 1570, 1572, 1573) also discuss intelligibility and meaningfulness as related to supernaturalism. I suggest that under supernaturalist suppositions, too, there are counterexamples to the intelligibility view in which meaningfulness and

5 It might be argued that the mystic's life could still be seen as intelligible if it 'fits' appropriately with a divine reality. However, this 'fitting' between the life and divine reality suggests a distinction between them that the mystical enlightenment rebuffs (as it does all other conceptualizations and categorizations). It is also unclear that a 'fit' between an unintelligible life and an unintelligible divine reality would make any of them, or the 'fit', intelligible.

intelligibility rates do not coincide. Again, mysticism provides many examples in which meaningfulness is high while intelligibility is low, suggesting that what constitutes meaningfulness is not intelligibility.⁶

There are also examples under supernaturalism in which intelligibility is high but meaningfulness is low, again suggesting that intelligibility does not constitute meaningfulness. Recall that supernaturalism is not limited to the traditional monotheism on which Seachris's, Repp's, and Thomas's examples rely. Suppose, following New (1993), Murphree (1997), Law (2010), and Collins (2019), among others, that the correct supernaturalist theory is the opposite of the monotheist one. Suppose that Satan, rather than God, is the first cause of everything, that Satan created and rules the universe, that God is just a fallen devil who behaves subversively in Satan's kingdom, etc. In this possible universe, Satan created the world because, in his evilness, he sadistically enjoys causing and seeing so much suffering and evil. He gave us free will so that we, too, could be evil: had we caused pain and injustice without freely choosing to do so, we, and the world, would not have been as evil as now. Satan allows some goodness and joy because, all in all, they are necessary for the greater evil and suffering. Although the world is not purely bad, it is the worst of all possible worlds (even if, because of our limitations, we do not always see how).

If New, Murphree, etc. are right, their antitheist, evil-god picture of the universe is as intelligible as the traditional monotheist one. In terms of the coherence of the different aspects of the antitheist universe, the degree to which in this universe means suit the evil ends of its creator, and the clarity and precision in which we can understand the antitheist universe, it seems as intelligible as the monotheistic one. But we could also play with the examples more and think of a possible antitheist universe that is even more intelligible and less meaningful than the token monotheist one. For example, in that possible universe, to Satan's joy, all people go to

6 Admittedly, some types of mysticism, such as Krishnamurti's and some type of Zen (Krishnamurti 1975, 205–208, 263–266; Suzuki 1979, 39–40), are not supernaturalist. However, most others, such as Meister Eckhart's (1978) or Rumi's (2009), are.

hell, where the just and virtuous are treated in especially painful and humiliating ways. Or, in another thought experiment, to Satan's immense pleasure, all people, even in this life, are always suffering in some of the more horrendous conditions Dante describes in the worst departments of his *Inferno*. Such a possible universe is even more intelligible under supernaturalist suppositions than the previous ones, since it is clearer why it is the worst of all possible worlds. And as Seachris (2019, 372) requires, it also allows intelligibility about the reason and purpose of our existence and of everything, of our suffering, where we come from and where we go, why we are here, etc. Supernaturalism also allows polytheist possible universes in which, for example, depraved gods enjoy torturing humans just as some depraved children enjoy torturing small animals so that, to the gods' amusement, all people go through Tantalus's tortures.

Thus, we have examples of high Thomas-type intelligibility with low meaningfulness. We can also have high Repp-type intelligibility with low meaningfulness. Suppose a universe in which the gods create physically and emotionally tortured people who are intelligent and understand unhappily the psychology of the torturing gods and many other facts about this terrible universe, continuing to live the lives they hate and find no point in (as some intellectuals tortured by oppressive regimes may experience). Under supernaturalist suppositions too, then, meaningfulness and intelligibility rates need not coincide, suggesting that it is not intelligibility that constitutes meaningfulness.

4.

I have discussed up to now intelligibility and meaning *in* life (that is, the meaningfulness of individual lives). But Seachris (2019, 370, 376–377) and Thomas (2019, 1556) take the intelligibility view to also hold for the meaning *of* life (that is, the meaningfulness of the existence of humanity or the cosmos at large). Moreover, they hold that our evaluations of meaning in life and of meaning of life are strongly connected.

For the sake of argument, grant that meaning in life and meaning of life are indeed as cohesively related as Seachris and Thomas take them to be.⁷ I suggest that incongruence between intelligibility and meaningfulness also can be shown for meaning of life and, hence, that the intelligibility view emerges as problematic for meaning of life as well.

Consider a possible universe in which all lives are similar to those of Adrian or Clarence, or to those of the people in the dystopian, satanic universe described above. Suppose also that we understand well this miserable world, full of lives with no or little meaning. As in the cases discussed above, understanding something that is meaningless does not make it meaningful. In such a universe, the existence of humanity or of the universe at large would be of high (Thomas-type) intelligibility but low meaningfulness. This also holds for Repp-type intelligibility. If all people lived lives full of *ennui*, bitterness, and self-detestation, yet also performed out of habit or nervousness many cognitive acts without enjoying them while also vengefully making life unpleasant for each other, again the existence of humanity would not be meaningful.

I have just considered cases of high intelligibility and low meaningfulness. But one can also present cases of low intelligibility and high meaningfulness. A world full of humans who live in small, self-supporting communities of Zen monks, having most of the time nonrational mystical experiences that both they and we cannot explain intelligibly, would be

⁷ However, unless we assume a very high degree of interrelatedness in the cosmos, it can be that some parts of the cosmos are meaningful while others, or the cosmos at large, are meaningless, and that some parts of the cosmos are meaningless while others, or the cosmos at large, are meaningful. This would be similar to a case in which an anthology of short stories is not very good but includes two or three excellent short stories or is good (even if not perfect) but includes two or three mediocre short stories. Likewise, it may be that the existence of humanity at large is meaningful while the lives of some people are not meaningful since they have a very low (or negative) value. And it is possible that a few people have highly meaningful lives but all the rest do not, and the meaningfulness of the former is insufficient to render meaningful the existence of humanity at large. Thomas and Seachris seem to suppose that there is a high degree of cohesiveness and interrelatedness of things in the cosmos, so that the meaningfulness of some lives impacts that of all others and of the whole cosmos, and vice versa. But they do not appear to present any argument for this supposition.

an example of a world in which the existence of humanity is of low (Thomas-type and Repp-type) intelligibility but of high meaningfulness. This would be true also under some supernaturalist religious views in which acceptance of mystical experiences, mystery, paradox, plain faith, direct religious experience, or piety, rather than rational understanding, are taken to relate people to the presence of God in everything.

5.

Thomas (2019, 1562–1563, 1568–1569) and Seachris (2019, 367–368) also relate meaning and intelligibility to purposefulness. However, meaningfulness rates also often do not match purposefulness rates. A life can be highly purposeful while being of low meaningfulness: suppose a drug addict is very purposeful and goal-oriented in order to satisfy her almost irresistible craving for the next fix, rationally choosing the most efficient means to realize this end. Suppose also that she despises herself for her life and what she does; she knows that she is wasting her life and wishes she had not become addicted years earlier. Both we and she do not think that her life is meaningful, although it is highly purposeful and goal-oriented, perhaps even more than your life and my life are.

On the other hand, consider again Metz's examples of the rescuer and the mystic. Metz's rescuer, who just ran into the burning house, was not purposeful in the sense of forming a purpose and trying to realize it—she just ran inside without thinking about it. When analyzed later, her action could be explained as just following a Kantian non-consequentialist moral motive, her sense of duty, or her emotional or subconscious drives. Likewise, although some mystics try very hard to achieve enlightenment, for others it just happens spontaneously without any purposefulness.⁸ Some artists also report that they paint intuitively because they 'just feel they must'.

⁸ See, e.g., Pascal 1948, 117; Brother Lawrence 1982, 11; Zaehner 1961, xiii. Some, such as Krishnamurti (1970, 244; 1975, 66–70), even warn against purposefulness since they take it to block enlightenment.

What has been said here of purposefulness and meaning in life is also true of purposefulness and meaning of life. In a possible satanic universe (or a polytheist terrible universe ruled by vicious, cruel gods) there would be a clear goal or purpose for humanity (namely, providing sadistic pleasure to Satan or the gods), but its existence would be of low meaningfulness. On the other hand, in a universe in which all people lived lives of love, kindness, warmth, creativity, serenity, deep aesthetic pleasure in natural beauty, etc. we would probably take the human race to live meaningfully even if we did not believe that there is a goal or a purpose for the human race.

6.

Showing that there are counterexamples to the intelligibility view does not, of course, show that the value view is correct. There may be counterexamples to it, too, so that both views are incorrect. However, up to now I have not been able to find any counterexamples to the value view, that is, cases of high meaningfulness with low value or cases of low meaningfulness with high value. Critics may disagree. In what follows, I present and reply to some putative counterexamples to the value view.

One may point to cases of alienation. It may be argued that alienated people sometimes hold that their lives are meaningless yet accept, even if only rationally or ‘academically’, that many aspects of their lives are valuable. Thus, we may have here examples of low meaningfulness with high value.⁹ In reply, I suggest that we should distinguish between weak and strong alienation. Weak, fleeting alienation, of the sort that many occasionally sense in various circumstances, but in which many aspects of life are still considered valuable, is not strong enough to make life meaningless. Only deep alienation is strong enough for that. However, in deep alienation

9 Such cases are problematic for the intelligibility view no less than for the value view, since alienated people who see their lives as meaningless often also find much in their lives rational and intelligible. However, this in itself does not answer the objection, since cases of alienation may disprove both the intelligibility view and the value view.

nothing seems valuable; people do not in fact see the value of aspects of their lives (or of whatever there is) in this state, which also alienates them to value; this is the condition of ‘I can’t see the point in anything’ or ‘nothing matters’. Thus, we do not in fact have here an example of low meaningfulness and high value.

Another argument against the value view may point at cases in which people consider their lives as of high value but as not meaningful out of perfectionism.¹⁰ Such people hold that only people like Gandhi, Beethoven, Einstein, or Kant have meaningful lives because, in their view, only lives that reach extremely high value are meaningful. However, such perfectionism is consistent with the value view rather than disproving it, since, for perfectionists too, what constitutes meaningfulness continues to be value; they just hold that only extremely high value is sufficient and that the value in their own and others’ lives, even if considerable, is not sufficiently high. Their judgment that their lives, although including much value, are meaningless does not refute the value view but corroborates it.

Yet other counterexamples to the value view may be in the lives of people such as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and (even if on a different scale) Ted Bundy. It might be argued that such lives are of low or even negative value but of high meaningfulness. To substantiate the claim that Hitler’s, Stalin’s, etc. lives are meaningful, one could rely on common linguistic practices. If asked whether the lives of Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot were meaningful in the twentieth century, many people would reply that these lives were *very* meaningful in the twentieth century while agreeing, of course, that these were terrible lives, not valuable ones. Thus, if we accept, as Thomas (2019, 1574) does, that lives such as Hitler’s are meaningful, we have examples of lives of high meaning but low value, which are counterexamples to the value view.

10 I use here ‘perfectionism’ and ‘perfectionists’ in their psychological sense, differently from Hurka (1993) and others for whom perfectionists are those who endorse a theory of the good life defined in terms of human nature.

In reply, I suggest that this criticism of the value view equivocates two distinct senses of ‘meaningful lives’.¹¹ The first sense of ‘meaningful lives’ is ‘impactful lives’ or ‘consequential lives’. The second sense of ‘meaningful lives’ is ‘lives that we admire, want for ourselves and our dear ones, and dread having the opposite of’. In its first sense, ‘meaningful lives’ has no, or low, normative connotations. It is descriptive, pointing out that a person’s life had much impact, just as events such as World War I or the 1929 stock market crash had much impact. The impact could be either good or bad. In contrast, in its second sense, ‘meaningful lives’ has strong normative connotations: it is something people aim for and want to attain.¹²

In its first sense, which has to do with impact and consequences, ‘meaningful lives’ is usually employed in historical or functional contexts, as in ‘Hitler’s life was meaningful in the twentieth century’ or ‘Ted Bundy’s life was meaningful for the lives of his victims and their families’. In its second sense, ‘meaningful lives’ is employed in existentialist contexts. Because in its first, ‘impact’ sense, ‘meaningful lives’ is employed in historical and functional contexts, it is usually followed by a preposition such as *in*, *for*, or *at* (as in ‘Hitler’s life was meaningful in the twentieth century’ or ‘Pol Pot’s life was meaningful for the fate of Cambodia’). In its second, existentialist sense, ‘meaningful lives’ need not be followed by a preposition (as in ‘the life of Zen master Keizan was meaningful’).

It is easy to miss the distinction between these two senses of ‘meaningful lives’ since many paradigmatic examples of meaningful lives (e.g., those of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela) are meaningful in both senses. Moreover, sometimes lives that become more meaningful in the first sense, that is, when they are more impactful, also become more meaningful

11 See Metz (2019, 412), where he calls for distinguishing clearly between different senses of ‘meaningful lives’ (or ‘meaning in life’), building on Mawson (2016).

12 The distinction between the descriptive and normative aspects of meaningfulness is already presented by Heintzelman and King (2014, 154). However, Heintzelman and King use it differently than here, to differentiate between coherence, on the one hand, and significance and purposefulness, on the other hand.

in the second sense, as again is the case with the lives of Gandhi, King, and Mandela. Yet a life can also be meaningful in the second but not the first sense: think of a recluse Zen master who has had many enlightenments but, because of some historical circumstances, could not have any disciples whom he could guide and impact. A life can also be meaningful in the first but not the second sense: Ted Bundy's life had a very large impact on the lives of his victims and their family members, and Pol Pot had an even greater impact. (Hence, in the first sense, Pol Pot had a more meaningful life than Ted Bundy). But their lives were not meaningful in the second sense. Likewise, a tyrant may make his life less meaningful in the first sense but more in the second by forsaking his office and joining a monastery, while changing his life in the opposite direction may decrease the second type of meaningfulness and increase the first. Because these are two distinct senses of 'meaningful lives', we can understand sentences such as 'X's life was meaningful in the twentieth century; but did he have a meaningful life?' Examples of lives that are meaningful in both senses, or that change in their degree of meaningfulness in both senses together, should not conceal the difference between the senses and the cases in which lives are meaningful in only one of the senses.

I suggest that the second, existentialist sense of 'meaningful lives' is the one relevant when considering whether meaningful lives are constituted by value, intelligibility, or purpose since impactful lives need be constituted by none of these. A crazy or negligent person can be immensely impactful by, e.g., spreading an epidemic, setting a city on fire, or poisoning its water supplies without doing so purposefully, showing any Thomas-like or Repp-like intelligibility, or enhancing value. Further, Seachris (2019, 365–367), Repp (2018, 411), and Thomas (2019, 1573–1574) discuss meaningfulness as something people aspire to and want (although Thomas 2019, 1574, also claims, surprisingly, that Hitler's life could be considered meaningful). But people do not want to have the lives of epidemic spreaders, pyromaniacs, or water supply poisoners, even though these lives are highly impactful. For this reason, too, it seems that the second, existentialist sense of 'meaningful lives' is the one relevant for this discussion (as well

as for most other discussions of meaning in life).¹³ And in this second, existentialist sense, Stalin's, Hitler's, and Ted Bundy's lives are not counterexamples to the value view, since they are not lives of low value but high meaningfulness.

7.

But if it is value, rather than intelligibility, that constitutes meaningfulness, how can the many cases in which intelligibility and meaningfulness rates do coincide be explained? The reply is that intelligibility is one of the aspects of value. For example, in the lives of many scholars and scientists, high intelligibility coincides with high meaningfulness because we value their high intellectual ability and achievement. Further, in many cases, various degrees of intelligibility are necessary for other aspects of value, such as moral behavior and artistic achievement, to hold. For example, Gandhi, King, Shakespeare, and Mozart could not have done what they did without also being very intelligent. Diminished intelligence disallows, then, not only valued intellectual achievement but, in some cases, also other aspects of value in life. Hence, there are many cases in which high intelligibility coincides with high meaningfulness and low intelligibility with low meaningfulness.

However, intelligibility and meaningfulness rates do not always coincide, because intelligibility is just one aspect of value among many others. Others are, for example, love, caring, compassion, happiness, courage, aesthetic experiences, trying to do positive things in the world, and succeeding to do so. When other aspects of value are very low, or are

13 Laypersons who have talked with me about life's meaningfulness have invariably discussed it as something they want or need and life's meaninglessness as something they wish to avoid or dread. Similarly, professionals—e.g., psychologists, educators, palliative caregivers, philosophers (both pessimists and optimists)—also almost invariably discuss meaningfulness as something that both they and others want or need and meaninglessness as something both they and others wish to avoid. All of them, too, would not be interested in lives that are just impactful without also being valuable. I submit (but for reasons of space cannot argue here for this claim) that this second, existentialist sense is also the one relevant for discussing meaningful and meaningless lives in literature (e.g., Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, Tolstoy).

even of negative value, high intelligibility can coincide with low meaningfulness (as in the cases of Stalin and Clamence). And when some other aspects of value are high, low intelligibility can coincide with high meaningfulness (as in the cases of the mystic and the rescuer). Further, while some aspects of value, in some degrees, require a high degree of intelligibility (as in the cases of Gandhi, King, etc. mentioned above), other aspects and degrees of value require only low degrees of intelligibility (as in the cases of the mystic, the rescuer, or people who reach a high degree of love, compassion, or deep enjoyment of natural scenery).

Thus, both cases in which intelligibility and meaningfulness rates coincide and cases in which they do not are explained well by the value view. Intelligibility makes life meaningful when it makes life reach a sufficiently high degree of value, but not otherwise. What primarily constitutes meaningfulness is value. Of course, some minimal degree of intelligibility is a necessary condition for any meaningfulness. The rescuer and the mystic could not have done anything without at least some categorization and comprehension. However, a high degree of intelligibility is not a necessary condition for meaningfulness, and neither low nor high degrees of intelligibility are sufficient conditions for meaningfulness. Intelligibility in some degree is an *ingredient* of any meaningful life. But it is not what *renders* life meaningful.

Much of what has been explained here of intelligibility also holds for purposefulness (discussed in Section 5 above).¹⁴ Purposefulness makes life meaningful if and only if it makes life reach a sufficiently high level of value. When it does not, and other aspects of value are low, as in the case of the purposeful drug addict, life is not meaningful even if purposefulness is high. And if other aspects of value are high, life can be meaningful even if purposefulness is low, as in the case of some mystics and of the rescuer. Again, what determines and constitutes meaningfulness is value.

14 However, unlike intelligibility, some degree of purposefulness is *not* necessary for any meaningfulness (see n. 8 above).

8.

Seachris, Thomas, and Repp also present a number of other, less central arguments, in favor of the intelligibility view and against the value view. Seachris points out that his version of the intelligibility view ‘organically secures conceptual space for each of the other ordinary senses of meaning that are relevant to understanding life’s meaning’ (2019, 371; see also 373, 374). The other ordinary senses of meaning Seachris discusses are value and purpose. However, this does not give an advantage to the intelligibility view over the value view, since the latter, too, secures a ‘conceptual space’ for other ordinary senses of meaning, such as intelligibility and purpose. As explained above, intelligibility and purpose are two of several aspects of value, hence their rates coincide (in many but not all cases) with those of meaningfulness.

Yet another supposed advantage of the intelligibility view is that it agrees with modern psychological work on meaning in life (Seachris 2019, 365 n.3, 371 n.12; Thomas 2019, 1559, 1570). However, the psychological research on meaningfulness is still in its very early stages and has not reached any consensus on this matter. Although some psychological discussions on meaningfulness emphasize factors related to intelligibility, others emphasize factors related to value, such as benevolence, autonomy, competence, or relatedness (see, e.g., Hicks and King 2009; Martela, Ryan, and Steger, 2018). Yet others discuss both intelligibility and value but do not take one of them to be foundational or hermeneutically prior to the other (e.g., King et al. 2006, 180; Steger et al. 2006, 81; Steger 2012, 65; Waytz, Hershfield, and Tamir 2015, 338).

Another argument for the intelligibility view is that some ways of asking about meaning in life, such as ‘What is it all about?’ have more affinity with questions related to intelligibility (Seachris 2019, 373). However, other questions, such as ‘What is the point of it all?’ or ‘Is this as good as it gets?’ have more affinity with questions related to value. A further supposed advantage of the intelligibility view is that, in everyday speech, ‘meaning’, ‘sense’, and ‘intelligibility’ are considered synonyms that could easily replace each other (Thomas 2019, 1558, 1570, 1571–1572; see also Repp

2018, 416, 418–419, 421; Seachris 2019, 364, 371–373). However, ‘meaning’ and its derivatives are also sometimes used synonymously with ‘value’ or ‘worth’, as in ‘they had meaningless sex’, or ‘after I met him my life became meaningful’. More importantly, I doubt that these common speech examples are very helpful for determining what constitutes the meaningfulness of meaningful lives. It seems that when we consider the meaningfulness of meaningful lives we should mostly rely not on common linguistic usage of ‘meaning’ in general but on examples of meaningful and meaningless lives, as presented in earlier sections of this paper.

Yet another argument points out that, historically, the rise in people’s concerns about meaninglessness in life coincided with the decrease in the centrality of religious theories that helped make the world intelligible (Seachris 2019, 376 n.18; Thomas 2019, 1572). However, religious theories present not only explanations but also many value attributions. They attribute value to certain entities (e.g., gods) that emanate their value on some behaviors (e.g., fasting, praying), objects (e.g., relics, shrines), times (e.g., holy days), people (e.g., priests, monks), and institutions (e.g., churches, religious orders). Religion, then, relates to value no less than to intelligibility. Further, as suggested in Section 4 above, some religious attitudes emphasize what is mysterious, paradoxical, or otherwise less intelligible; they sometimes enhance meaningfulness by enhancing value but not intelligibility.

A further argument is that ‘evolutionarily, our survival depends on our ability to detect patterns and relationships in our environment and make use of this knowledge to plan our behavior’ (Thomas 2019, 1559). However, not only the capacity to identify patterns but also the capacity to value some things rather than others has been useful evolutionarily. More importantly, not everything that may have been useful evolutionarily (e.g., aggression, herd mentality, oppressing the weaker and submitting to the stronger, biological instincts of various types) constitutes meaningfulness.

Thomas (2019, 1572) claims that John Stuart Mill’s emotional crisis, which erupted when he came to think that were he to achieve all his

moral and social goals his life would become less happy, supports the intelligibility view: the crisis erupted because Mill came to see his life's effort as paradoxical and incomprehensible. However, Mill's crisis can just as plausibly be interpreted according to the value view. When it occurred to him that were he to realize all his goals it would not 'be a great joy and happiness' for him but, rather, a condition in which 'the end has ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means?', it is the value of his goals, and thus the value of his life's efforts, that was undermined for him (Mill 1964, 107).

Likewise, Thomas (2019, 1572) and Seachris (2019, 365) mention that absurdity is often experienced as lack of understanding. However, it is often also experienced as lack of value. Camus (1955, 12–22) discusses in his *Myth of Sisyphus* both misunderstanding and the fact that we get old and die, or that our regular, scheduled lives cease to seem worthy, as explanations of the absurd. Nagel presents the absurd as having to do with the collision between the seriousness with which we treat many aspects of our lives and 'the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt' (1979, 13).

9.

I have argued in this paper that, with no exception, whenever meaningfulness is high, so is value; and whenever meaningfulness is low, so is value. This is not the case, however, for meaningfulness and intelligibility: there are counterexamples to the intelligibility view. This suggests that what constitutes meaningfulness is value rather than intelligibility. Intelligibility affects meaningfulness by affecting overall value.

Towards the end of *Oedipus Rex*, the intelligibility rate in Oedipus's life radically increases while meaningfulness radically decreases. Many other people occasionally note that the meaningfulness of their lives sometimes vastly decreases or increases because of sickness or recovery, isolation or companionship, demotion or promotion, and other bad or good events in life, while very little, if anything, changes in the intelligibility rate of

their lives, and in some cases intelligibility changes in the opposite direction than meaningfulness does.

Many are interested in and focus on some specific aspects of value more than on others, and thus tend to identify those specific aspects of value with meaningfulness to the extent that other aspects of value (and therefore of meaningfulness) are less noticed. This may also happen to some of those who focus on intelligibility as determining meaningfulness. I have tried to argue here for an account that also acknowledges how other aspects of value—such as love, courage, serenity, fortitude, non-intellectual aesthetic experiences of nature, mystical experiences, or moral acts that are less related to intellectual activity—can make life meaningful. Once we consider the wide array of aspects of value that can make our lives meaningful, and all the cases in which, without sufficient value, life is not meaningful, it becomes clearer that it is value, rather than merely intelligibility, that constitutes meaningfulness.

University of Haifa

ilandau@research.haifa.ac.il

Acknowledgements: An earlier draft of this paper was read at the Central European University in Budapest on February 11, 2020. I am grateful to the audience for their helpful comments. I am also very grateful to Michael Antony, Ran Lanzet, Samuel Lebens, Saul Smilansky, Daniel Statman, Michele L. Waldinger, and two anonymous referees for *Philosophical Papers* for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

- Ayer, A. J. (1990). 'The Meaning of Life.' In *The Meaning of Life and Other Essays*, 178–197. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Bramble, B. (2015). 'Consequentialism about Meaning in Life.' *Utilitas* 27(4): 445–459.
- Brother Lawrence. (1982). *The Practice of the Presence of God*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House.
- Camus, A. (1955). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by J. O'Brien. New York: Vintage.
- . (1991). *The Fall*. Translated by J. O'Brien. New York: Vintage.

- Collins, J. M. (2019). 'The Evil-God Challenge: Extended and Defended.' *Religious Studies* 55: 85–109.
- Eckhart, M. (1978). *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher*. Translated with Commentary by R. Schürmann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Goldman, Alan (2018). *Life's Values: Pleasure, Happiness, Well-Being, and Meaning*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heintzelman, S. J. and King, L. A (2014). '(The Feeling of) Meaning-as-Information.' *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 18: 153–167.
- Hicks, J. A. and King, L. A (2009). 'Positive Mood and Social Relatedness as Information about Meaning in Life.' *Journal of Positive Psychology* 4: 471–482.
- Hurka, T. (1993). *Perfectionism*. New York: Oxford University Press,
- Kauppinen, A. (2012). 'Meaningfulness and Time.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82(2): 345–77.
- King, L. A., Hicks, J. A., Krull, J., and Del Gaiso, A. K. (2006). 'Positive Affect and the Experience of Meaning in Life.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90: 179–196.
- Krishnamurti, J. (1970). *The Penguin Krishnamurti Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . (1975). *The First and Last Freedom*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Landau, I. (2017). *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Law, S (2010). 'The Evil-God Challenge.' *Religious Studies* 46: 353–373.
- Martela, F., Ryan, R. M., and Steger, M. F (2018). 'Meaningfulness as Satisfaction of Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, and Beneficence.' *Journal of Happiness Studies* 19: 1261–1282.
- Mawson, T. J. (2016). *God and the Meanings of Life*. London: Bloomsbury.
- May, T. (2015). *A Significant Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Metz, T. (2013). *Meaning in Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . (2019). 'Recent Work on the Meaning of "Life's Meaning": Should We Change the Philosophical Discourse?' *Human Affairs* 29: 404–414.
- Mill, J. S. (1964). *Autobiography*. New York: New American Library.
- Murphree, W. A. (1997). 'Natural Theology: Theism or Antitheism?' *Sophia* 36: 75–83.

- Nagel, T. (1979). 'The Absurd.' In *Mortal Questions*, 11–23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- New, C. (1993). 'Antitheism: A Reflection.' *Ratio* 6(1): 36–43.
- Pascal, B. (1948). *Great Shorter Works of Pascal*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Repp, C. (2018). 'Life Meaning and Sign Meaning.' *Philosophical Papers* 47: 403–427.
- Rumi, J. a-D (2009). *Mystical Poems of Rumi*. Translated by A. J. Arberry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Seachris, J. (2019). 'From the Meaning Triad to Meaning Holism: Unifying Life's Meaning.' *Human Affairs* 29(4): 363–378.
- Smuts, A. (2013). 'The Good Cause Account of the Meaning of Life.' *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51(4): 536–562.
- Steger, M. F. (2012). 'Experiencing Meaning in Life.' In P. T. P. Wong (ed.), *The Human Quest for Meaning*, 2nd ed., 165–184. New York: Routledge.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., and Kaler, M. (2006). 'The Meaning in Life Questionnaire: Assessing the Presence of and Search for Meaning in Life.' *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 53: 80–93.
- Suzuki, D. T. (1979). *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. London: Rider.
- Taylor, R. (2008). 'The Meaning of Life.' In E. D. Klemke and S. M. Cahn (eds.), *The Meaning of Life*, 3rd ed., 134–142. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, J. L. (2019). 'Meaningfulness as Sensefulness.' *Philosophia* 47: 1555–77.
- Trisel, B. A. (2002). 'Futility and the Meaning of Life Debate.' *Sorites* 14: 70–84.
- Waytz, A., Hershfield, H. E., and Tamir, D. I. (2015). 'Mental Simulation and Meaning in Life.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108: 336–355.
- Wolf, S. (2010). *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zaehner, R. C. (1961). *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*. New York: Oxford University Press.