

Standards, Perspectives, and the Meaning of Life: A Reply to Seachris

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1 Introduction

In a recent article in this journal, Joshua W. Seachris (2012) argues that the distinction I make between perspectives and standards in *sub specie aeternitatis* arguments for the meaninglessness of life does not hold for a salient component of the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective: the ontological-normative component. In this article I suggest that Seachris's argument is problematic in a number of ways and ought to be rejected.

2 Background

Various authors, such as Albert Camus (1969, p. 78), Nicholas Rescher (1990, p. 153) and Simon Blackburn (2001, p. 79), have argued that when lives are considered as a part of very large temporal or spatial contexts, they are realized to be meaningless. Considered in the context of a million years, whatever one chooses or achieves in a life or even the fact that one has existed seems unimportant: the world would be the same in a million years whether or not we had existed and whatever we might or might not have done. Our effect on the world is temporally limited to a generation or two or, at the most and for very few people, to several hundreds or thousands of years. Our effect is also quite limited spatially: there are many stars and galaxies that we do not affect in any way.

We usually consider our lives against the background of smaller contexts, such as our own generation or our own community or world. As long as we continue to do so, Camus's, Rescher's and Blackburn's argument goes, the effects of our lives may seem considerable, and thus our lives meaningful. But once we consider our lives within larger contexts, we realize that our effect is relatively limited. Perhaps if the effects of our actions were to last for millions

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of years, and if we were to affect many stars in all the distant galaxies, we would consider our lives to be meaningful. But upon recognizing that our effect is as limited as it is, we cannot but see our lives as meaningless. Camus, Rescher, and Blackburn suggest that to see our lives as meaningful we should consider our lives only within smaller contexts such as our own generation or community and refrain from considering them against the background of larger temporal or spatial contexts.

Thomas Nagel's (1986) discussion of the topic differs in some ways from Camus's, Rescher's, and Blackburn's. First, according to Nagel, the **perspective** that considers lives against the background of smaller temporal and spatial contexts is also an **internal, engaged, first-personal, subjective perspective** that discloses our lives as necessary. The **perspective that considers lives against the background of the whole of space** and time is also an **external, detached, impersonal, objective perspective** that discloses lives as **contingent**. Nagel refers to the second perspective in a number of ways, one of which is with the term *sub specie aeternitatis*. The other perspective might be called *sub specie humanitatis* (although Nagel himself does not use this term). **Second, unlike Camus, Rescher, and Blackburn, for Nagel our lives from the *sub specie aeternitatis* (SSA) perspective are not realized to be meaningless but only to be of diminished meaning** compared with that realized under the *sub specie humanitatis* (SSH) perspective. Third, unlike Camus, Rescher, and Blackburn, Nagel does not think that we can disregard the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective.

Nagel does not specify whether he takes the various aspects of the SSA perspective, or the various aspects of the SSH perspective, to coincide necessarily or merely often. In my paper (Landau 2011) I emphasize that they do not coincide necessarily; seeing our lives within very large temporal and spatial contexts need not coincide with considering them in an external, detached, impersonal, or objective manner, or with taking them to be contingent. **All these ways of considering our lives may or may not concur and do not entail each other.** Likewise, **seeing our lives against the background of smaller contexts such as our own generation or our own community need not coincide with considering them in an internal, engaged, personal, or subjective manner or with seeing them as necessary.** Again, these ways of considering our lives may or may not concur and do not entail each other. For example, one may adopt the internal perspective and examine one's life either in the context of very few events in one's immediate environment or in the context of the universe at large. Similarly, one can recognize one's contingency when considering one's life either subjectively or objectively, personally or impersonally, against the background of one's immediate environment or of the whole of time and space.

Furthermore, my critique of Nagel, Camus, Rescher, and Blackburn sharply distinguishes between *standards* and *perspectives*. I argue that even while seeing our lives against the background of the vastness of time and space, we may yet reject the rather ambitious standard according to which lives that do not affect most of the cosmos for millions of years are of lower or insufficient meaning. We *may*, of course, endorse such an ambitious standard of meaningfulness. But—as already argued by Skott Brill (2007, pp. 18–19)—we may also endorse others, according to which, for example, positively affecting three people's lives (say, by relieving their hunger or pain) for ten years is quite sufficient to make life highly meaningful. Of course, once we think about our lives in the context of all of time and space, the truth of the claim that we affect only a relatively small portion of the cosmos for a relatively short time becomes clear. But realizing this does not entail the adoption of a standard of meaningfulness according to which only what affects all stars and galaxies forever is meaningful. And it is the *standard of meaningfulness* that one chooses, not the *perspective* that one adopts from which to view lives, that determines whether our lives are seen as meaningful. What has been said here of the

perspective that considers our lives in the context of all time and space is true also of impersonal, detached, external, or objective perspectives. They allow, but do not necessitate, that we judge our lives as of no or of less meaning; **it is our standards, not our perspective**, that determine our evaluation of the meaning of our lives. Similarly, acknowledging our contingency does not necessitate that we judge our lives as being of no or of less meaning. Of course, if one takes only necessary existence to be meaningful, then any contingent existence would be deemed meaningless. But one need not endorse this standard; other standards would yield different results. Again, all depends on the standard of meaningfulness we employ. Hence, I suggest in my critique, Nagel, Camus, Rescher, and Blackburn are wrong.

Note that while some discussions of the meaning of life (e.g., Trisel 2004, pp. 378–379, Taylor 1970, pp. 264–268) argue for subjectivist conceptions of meaningfulness, others present objectivist accounts (e.g., Wolf 2010, pp. 9–10, 16–17; Cottingham 2003). Many discussions conflate subjective and objective meaningfulness (sometimes distinguished also, respectively, as “meaning” and “value”). Subjectivists consider one’s sensation of meaningfulness to be a necessary and sufficient condition for the meaningfulness of one’s life. Thus, for subjectivists, one’s life will be meaningful if one feels or believes that it is meaningful, and will be meaningless if one feels that it is meaningless. Objectivists (or, to employ the other terminology, those who discuss value), focus on what is taken to be the objective value that one has attained in life. A very valuable life such as Alan Turing’s can be found meaningless to its subject, while a life that has no marked value, or that even has a negative value, such as that of a drug-pusher, can be found meaningful to its subject (who may sense that his successful expansion of his “territory” made his life meaningful). Unfortunately, many discussions are unclear on whether they are discussing meaning or value (or, to employ the other set of terms, “subjective meaningfulness” or “objective meaningfulness”). Camus, Rescher, Blackburn and Nagel, however, seem to be discussing not only people’s sensations of meaningfulness, but also value or “objective meaningfulness.” This is also the way Seachris, whose claims are criticized ahead, understands Camus, Rescher, Blackburn and Nagel, and the way he employs “meaning.” Hence, whenever “meaning” and its derivatives are used in this paper, they should be understood as referring not to subjective, sensed meaningfulness, but to value or “objective meaningfulness.”

3 Must the SSA Perspective Include an Ontological-Normative Component?

In his paper, Seachris argues that the SSA perspective also includes an ontological-normative component that, because of “a lack of conceptual precision” (2012, p. 4), Nagel, Camus, Rescher, Blackburn, and I fail to notice. According to Seachris, adopting the SSA perspective, which considers a life within the context of all time and space, requires one to consider that life also in the context of “what is most fundamental or what is most real . . . the perspective from the rock-bottom, ontological level” (2012, p. 5). Furthermore, because of the normative aspect of this ontological-normative component of the SSA perspective, the sharp distinction I introduce between *perspectives* and *standards of meaningfulness* emerges as incorrect (Seachris 2012, p. 12). Note that Seachris does not merely make the weaker claim that the perspective from the rock-bottom, fundamental ontological level *may* coincide with the **perspectives that take account of very large temporal or spatial contexts**. Instead, he makes the stronger claim that if one analyzes the SSA perspective with sufficient conceptual precision, one will see that it consists not only of a temporal and a spatial component, but also of the ontological-normative component he talks about (2012, p. 4). For him, the temporal, spatial, modal, and ontological-normative components are “individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a perspective to be the SSA

perspective.” He also takes the temporal, spatial, and modal components to be the characteristics of the ontological-normative component (2012, p. 11).¹

I have already argued in my discussion of Nagel (Landau 2011, pp. 733–34) that the temporal and spatial perspectives are independent of a modal perspective, and I will not repeat these arguments here. (Seachris, who disagrees, does not refer to my arguments or challenge them.) Instead, I will focus in this paper on Seachris’s main and new claim that the spatial and temporal perspectives require one also to hold views about a deep ontological-normative component that is most fundamental and real. I believe this claim to be incorrect, because arguments for the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of life from the vastness of time and space are independent of arguments for the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of life that consider what is most fundamental or real. The former do not presuppose or entail the latter: one may accept the former arguments without accepting the latter arguments, as one may accept the latter without accepting the former. Of course, the claim that time and space are vast presupposes the claim that time and space exist, and that is an ontological claim. Likewise, the claims that there is a life and that this life affects some things are also ontological claims. But these claims in themselves do not commit one to any ontological claim about the “most fundamental and most real” element, or that life should be considered in relation to it. What has been said here of *arguments* is also true of *perspectives*: the perspective that acknowledges the vastness of time and space does not presuppose or entail the perspective acknowledging “what is most fundamental or what is most real.”

Seachris supports his claim with several arguments that I will now proceed to examine. But before doing so I should note a common presupposition that his arguments share and with which I disagree. Seachris presupposes that there is one, essential, unified *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective in discussions of the meaning of life, and that an analysis of this perspective, if carried out with sufficient precision, will uncover its correct components. But the term “*sub specie aeternitatis* perspective” (or “SSA perspective”) is new in discussions of the meaning of life, is somewhat unclear, and is employed quite loosely. Many of those who evaluate life’s meaningfulness from different perspectives do not mention the term at all (it does not appear, for example, in Camus’s, Rescher’s, or Blackburn’s discussions). Nagel does employ the term from time to time, but quite sparingly. The term appears frequently in Seachris’s and my discussions of Nagel, Camus, Rescher, Blackburn, and others, but it seems wrong, at least at this stage, to treat it as a notion that could be profitably analyzed. It is more plausible to see it as an optional “umbrella term” for several perspectives that may be relevant for evaluations of the meaning of life: there are many perspectives that could each be called a “*sub specie aeternitatis* perspective,” and it is also possible to call several of them together by that name or by others. (Nagel, too, may well be using “*sub specie aeternitatis*” as a mere umbrella term.) Thus, I believe that it is unhelpful, at least at this stage, to treat this new and loosely used term as a notion that could be conceptually analyzed into its essential components.

Even if we were to consider a “*sub specie aeternitatis* perspective” as a notion that should be analyzed into its components, I do not think that Seachris’s arguments suffice to show that it includes the ontological-normative component he has in mind. Seachris’s first argument points out that Rescher’s discussion of our lives in the context of vast temporal and spatial contexts includes the expression “the grand scheme of things” (2012, p. 6). Seachris notes that many people employ this expression, after undergoing some small misfortune (e.g.,

¹ These two claims seem to be in tension, since if the other three components are merely characteristics of the ontological-normative component, the ontological-normative component should be seen as a sufficient condition for the SSA perspective rather than merely a necessary but not sufficient condition. But I will not pursue this issue here.

receiving a B on a philosophy paper), in sentences such as “well, in the grand scheme of things this does not matter that much” (2012, p. 7). According to Seachris, people who employ the expression in this way frequently mean “given *what is really important*, this does not especially matter that much,” or “given *the system of value at the level of what is fundamentally true about the world*, this unfortunate circumstance is really not that important” (2012, p. 7, emphases added). This, Seachris argues, suggests that an ontological-normative factor about what matters or what is important is at play when we employ the expression “the grand scheme of things.” Seachris extrapolates from such employments of “the grand scheme of things” to the SSA perspective on the basis of the similarity he finds between the notion of “the grand scheme of things” in such employments of the term and the SSA perspective (2012, p. 8).

But it is unclear on what Seachris bases his claim that people who use “the grand scheme of things” when encountering misfortunes are frequently thinking of the misfortunes not merely in the context of the many occurrences that have happened and will happen in the universe, but as related to something along the lines of the ontological-normative component he has in mind, that is, “the system of value at the level of what is fundamentally true about the world,” (2012, p. 7).² Seachris does not present any evidence for this claim. The way almost all of my students and colleagues report that they employ the phrase “the grand scheme of things” when encountering misfortunes, however, suggests that at least some people who employ this phrase are thinking of their misfortunes merely in the context of the many occurrences that have happened and will happen in the universe and not as related to the ontological normative component Seachris has in mind. Grant, however, that some people who employ “the grand scheme of things” are thinking of the ontological-normative component. Grant also that the common use of “the grand scheme of things” shows us how the notion “the SSA perspective” should be properly analyzed in philosophical discussions. If people who employ “the grand scheme of things” are thinking of the ontological-normative component Seachris has in mind only in some cases but not in others, then the component appears as only a possible rather than a necessary part of “the grand scheme of things” and, by analogy, of “the SSA perspective.” But if this is the case, then Seachris’s claim that the ontological-normative component is a necessary rather than an optional part of the SSA perspective remains unsubstantiated.

I should point out that I, too, hold that arguments claiming that life is meaningless or less meaningful once it is seen in the context of the vastness of time and space (or once seen from other perspectives that could be gathered under “the SSA perspective”) do have a normative dimension to them. This is because these arguments discuss the meaningfulness of life, and that is a normative concept. The meaningfulness of life has to do with value. The lover who thinks that his life is meaningless because his loved one rejects him, the bereaved parents who say that since they lost their child their lives have been meaningless, or the composer who takes her life to be meaningless because she has not turned out to be as good a composer as Mozart was, are all saying that they feel that something of great value in their lives has been lost or has not appeared. They would return to seeing their lives as meaningful if what they lack or have lost were to be found or if they were to succeed in finding or creating something else of sufficient value. Likewise, those who claim that their lives are meaningless because their actions will have an effect for only eighty years, but not a million years, are saying that they think that having an effect for eighty years is not sufficiently worthy,

² Seachris also refers to this component as “what is ultimately *real*” (2012, p. 11, Seachris’s emphasis), “the widest, deepest vantage point” (2012, p. 9), and “the perspective from the rock-bottom, ontological level” (2012, p. 5).

while having an effect for a million years may be valuable enough (much also depends, of course, on other variables such as the nature of the effect). The *argument* that life is meaningless if it is considered from the SSA perspective, then, must of course have a normative dimension to it. But that does not mean that the vastness of time and the vastness of space in themselves, or the large context itself, or the SSA perspective in itself, have a normative dimension. And of course it also does not mean that they have an ontological-normative dimension of the specific nature that Seachris discusses.

Seachris's second argument points out that many theists who consider life from the SSA perspective do not reach the conclusion that life is meaningless. Because they believe in God, that is, "an agent who grounds teleology and normativity at the deepest level" (2012, p. 9), they take life to be meaningful even when considered in the context of all time and space. Atheists who consider life from the SSA perspective, on the other hand, frequently believe that life is meaningless. (This, indeed, is the case for Camus, Rescher, and Blackburn; however, for Nagel life under the SSA perspective is considered not meaningless but only less meaningful than when considered under the SSH perspective.) Seachris argues that this indicates that just like theists, atheists, too, have a "deep, wide, sweeping view of the whole of reality" (2012, p. 9) with its ontological-normative aspects.

However, the fact that theists who consider life to be meaningful under the SSA perspective rely on a deep ontological-normative notion about what is most fundamental and real (i.e., God) does not prove that atheists who consider life to be meaningless under the SSA perspective also rely on a deep ontological-normative notion about what is most fundamental and real. Atheists who consider life to be meaningless under the SSA perspective *may*, of course, rely on deep ontological-normative notions about what is most fundamental and real, but may also reach their conclusions by relying on standards that do not rely on what is most fundamental and real (e.g., the fact that no one will remember them a million years from now). Seachris's examples seem to challenge rather than corroborate his view: they show that considering a life from the perspective of the vastness of time and space is *independent* of the standards employed to evaluate the meaningfulness of that life. The perspective of the vastness of time and space is consistent with either theistic or atheistic views and standards. As I have shown in my critique (Landau 2011, pp. 729–33), atheist discussions that start off from the SSA perspective, such as Nagel's, Camus's, Rescher's, or Blackburn's, may or may not reach pessimistic conclusions about the meaning of life. Similarly, contrary to Seachris's suggestion, theist discussions that start off from the SSA perspective may or may not reach optimistic conclusions about the meaning of life. One may accept theistic systems in which God or other deities decree standards and in which humans who fail to fulfill these standards have meaningless lives. The SSA perspective is consistent with a very wide variety of standards, both theistic and atheistic, for evaluating the meaning of life. The perspective does not entail or presuppose this or that theistic or atheistic standard. And it is the standards, rather than the perspective, that determine whether life will be considered meaningful.

A third argument points out that

Often, we are tempted to pessimism when we begin to think that who we are and what we do does not matter (or is not ultimately what is real) *all the way down or deep down or at the fundamental level of reality*. . . . The worry is that the cluster of human values and concerns is only real to us, as opposed to being real in a mind-independent, objective way. (2012, p. 9, Seachris's emphasis)

Some people feel that their lives are meaningless because they fear that what they believe to be of value is, in fact, not "really," or objectively, of value, but only seems to them to be so. They feel the need for some reliable basis on which to ground their judgments about what is

meaningful and sometimes have difficulty in finding such a basis that satisfies “certain objective, mind-independent conditions” (2012, p. 9). Seachris identifies the wish to ascertain that one’s values are objectively valuable with the wish to find an ontological-normative component that is ultimately real “all the way down or deep down or at the fundamental level of reality.” Moreover, he takes the concern about the objective status of our values to be another aspect of the SSA perspective (2012, pp. 9–10).

I believe that Seachris is correct in claiming that some people feel that their lives are meaningless because they are not certain of their values or cannot find a secure basis for them. The concern appears also in other authors (see, e.g., Sartre 1956, pp. 479–80). But Seachris’s identification of the wish to ascertain that one’s values are indeed valuable with the wish to find an ontological-normative component that is ultimately real “all the way down or deep down or at the fundamental level of reality” is problematic. The two interests are distinct, and those who seek to ascertain that values are indeed valuable may, but do not have to, seek an ontological-normative component that is ultimately real “all the way deep down or at the fundamental level of reality.” Nagel’s discussion is an example, but even if it were not, the distinction between the two requirements holds.

But even if the argument for the meaninglessness of life from the uncertainty of values were to refer to the ontological-normative component, it would have been insufficient to show that the SSA perspective must include this component, since the argument for the meaninglessness of life from the uncertainty of values is distinct from and independent of other arguments for the meaninglessness of life. It might seem that once we view ourselves “from a distance” or “from the outside” we recognize that the chains of justifications for our values always reach a final link beyond which they cannot be justified or are circular, and thus our values are arbitrary and dubitable. But although viewing ourselves “from a distance” and realizing that our chains of justification are final or circular *may*, indeed, concur, they do not have to. We can also reach such conclusions about the justifications of our values when we consider them in a subjective, “internal,” and engaged way. And an “external” or “distanced” consideration of the justifications of our values need not reach the conclusion that our values are arbitrary or dubitable: as already argued by Quentin Smith (1991, p. 121), they may also be taken to be self-evident. The same is true of Kantians and of others who present their theories in an “external” or “disengaged” fashion but reject the view that the values they espouse are arbitrary or dubitable.

Likewise, it might be suggested that once we view ourselves “from a distance” or “from the outside” we recognize that had we been put together differently (in terms of nature, nurture, or both) we probably would have had different values. But again, we could also realize this when we view ourselves subjectively, “internally,” or in an “engaged” manner. And it is possible to consider oneself “from a distance” or “from the outside” yet adopt a nonrelativist view of value. It is possible, of course, to refer to all these claims about the meaninglessness of life under the umbrella term “SSA perspective.” But it is important to see that they do not entail or presuppose each other.

Seachris’s fourth argument is based on a passage from Bertrand Russell’s *A Free Man’s Worship* (1957, p. 107), where Russell discusses a number of reasons for thinking that the scientific worldview renders life meaningless. Russell mentions in that passage, among other issues, that according to the scientific worldview “man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving,” that “his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms,” and that “all the labors of the ages, all the devotion ... are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system” (1957, p. 107). According to Seachris, the whole passage discusses life from the SSA perspective, and the second sentence cited above, claiming that human

growth, hopes, loves and beliefs are but “the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms,” refers to the ontological-normative component (2012, p. 10). Seachris concludes from this that an ontological-normative component is indeed part and parcel of the SSA perspective. However, Russell does not seem to be presupposing in this passage the view Seachris attributes to him. The sentence on which Seachris focuses does not seem to discuss an ontological-normative component since it refers to the “accidental collocation of atoms” as the basis of everything, and thus seems to discuss a modal issue rather than an ontological-normative one. Furthermore, even if the “accidental allocation of atoms” were to refer to the ontological-normative component, this would have been insufficient for showing that Russell takes it to be a necessary part of a consolidated SSA perspective, as Russell merely mentions in the passage various arguments for the meaninglessness of life one after the other. He nowhere suggests that they are part of the same perspective or that they presuppose or entail each other. Finally, even if Russell were to profess in this passage the view Seachris attributes to him, this would be insufficient to show that the view is correct; the claim that an ontological-normative component is part and parcel of an SSA perspective has to be corroborated by arguments.

Seachris’s fifth argument is that

[the claim] that the SSA perspective should be construed as having an ontological-normative component gains further plausibility when we consider that it is already generally taken to include aspects that fall outside of its literal meaning. SSA, if construed in a wooden, literal fashion, really only emphasizes the time component. However, no philosopher limits it to that component alone. (2012, p. 10)

According to Seachris, then, although the word *aeternitatis* in the expression *sub specie aeternitatis* literally refers only to a time component, the notion of *sub specie aeternitatis* is frequently taken to refer to other issues as well, and the ontological-normative issue may well be one of those issues.

Traditionally, the term *aeternitatis* seems not to have had to do with time at all, as it relates to *eternity*, which was traditionally considered to be *beyond* time (even vast stretches of time or infinite time). In Spinoza’s system, *sub specie aeternitatis* does indeed have an ontological dimension (Spinoza 2000, pp. 153, 307), although it seems to lack a normative dimension, as Spinoza takes goodness to be a strictly human evaluation that has to do with human interests and welfare but not with “fundamental reality.” Perhaps there are other traditional uses of *sub specie aeternitatis* that do indeed relate to an ontological-normative component. But such uses are insufficient to prove that the term, as it is used today in atheist, analytic discussions of the meaning of life, also refers to an ontological or ontological-normative component.³ Seachris’s employment of the term seems largely monotheistic or Platonist: he appears to have in mind God or a Platonic Idea that has the highest degree of reality, is good, and is fundamental to or grounds all that there is (or all that is real and good). This traditional employment of *sub specie aeternitatis* is, of course, at least as legitimate as the others mentioned in this paper, but it is important to remember that it is also very different from them.

Seachris argues that Nagel, Rescher, Blackburn, and I, along with many others, fail to clarify sufficiently what the SSA perspective is and thus do not see that it must also include the ontological-normative component to which he points. But I suggest that the term “SSA

³ The term appears also in modern analytic work that does not discuss the meaning of life, and there, too, it does not seem to refer to an ontological or an ontological-normative component. See, e.g., Wittgenstein (1969, p. 83e), Rawls (1971, p. 587), and Floridi (2011, p. 345).

perspective” is so loosely and inconsistently used that clarifications or analyses of its contents are, in fact, highly stipulative. Many perspectives and notions could be referred to by the term “the SSA perspective,” and it is best, when employing it, to be very clear about which of the specific perspectives or notions one is referring to. It is also problematic to rely on this term in order to prove that one of these perspectives entails or is presupposed by another.

4 Does the Ontological-Normative Component Admit a Distinction Between Standards and Perspectives?

Assume, however, for the sake of argument, that the SSA perspective must include the ontological-normative component Seachris talks about and, moreover, that this component is the most salient of them all. Seachris argues that if this is accepted, then “it is the case that one cannot divorce one’s standard for meaningfulness from the SSA perspective qua the ontological-normative component” (2012, p. 14). I will argue here that this claim of Seachris’s is incorrect.

Consider an argument that is analogous to Nagel’s, Camus’s, Rescher’s, and Blackburn’s arguments for the meaninglessness (or for the diminished meaning) of life, except that it focuses on the ontological-normative component. In such an argument, the SSA perspective will allow us to recognize not (or not only) the vastness of time or space but, following Seachris, also (and predominantly) “what is most fundamental or what is most real” (2012, p. 5). Since Seachris does not simply distinguish real from unreal but characterizes the ontological-normative component as having to do with what is *most* fundamental and *most* real, I understand that he believes there to be degrees of ontological fundamentality and of reality. Perhaps if we believe in Plato’s Ideas or in a monotheistic God, we may think that the Ideas or God have a very high degree of ontological fundamentality or reality, while we humans have lower degrees of fundamentality and reality. Just as we usually think not about the vastness of time and space but only about what is temporally and spatially familiar and close to us, so too do we usually think not about higher degrees of fundamentality and reality but only about those that are familiar and close to us. However, once we do recognize that our lives have lower degrees of fundamentality and reality than that possessed by the Ideas or by God, we may feel that our lives are meaningless.

Seachris agrees with my criticism of Nagel’s, Camus’s, Rescher’s, and Blackburn’s arguments: we can see a life as meaningful within the context of the vastness of time and space. We can do so because we can recognize a *perspective* that allows us to consider the vastness of time and of space, thus realizing that there is very much that a life does not affect, while endorsing a *standard* according to which a relatively small effect in time and space is sufficient to render a life meaningful. A *perspective* that enables us to recognize the vastness of time and space does not entail a *standard* that requires us to affect everything in time and space. Perspectives and standards are distinct. Seachris only denies that we can distinguish between perspective and standard when the ontological-normative component is at issue. But it is not clear why he denies this option for the ontological-normative component. Here too, as with time and space, we can surely recognize a *perspective* that allows us to consider the existence of a high level of fundamentality and reality and thus causes us to realize that our level of fundamentality and reality is lower, while still endorsing a *standard* according to which a lower degree of fundamentality and reality is sufficient to render a life meaningful. Again, perspective and standard are distinguishable, and the former does not entail the latter. The perspective allows us to endorse either a very demanding standard, according to which

only a very high degree of fundamentality would render our lives meaningful, or a less demanding (and perhaps more realistic) standard, according to which plausible degrees of fundamentality are sufficient to render life meaningful.

Note that seeing our life *sub specie aeternitatis* but at the same time embracing a realistic standard of meaningfulness differs from seeing our life *sub specie humanitatis*. This latter perspective, analogous to the one that considers our lives only within the context of what is temporally and spatially familiar and close to us, overlooks or ignores the existence of higher degrees of fundamentality and reality, noticing or focusing only on ours. What has been said here of the ontological sphere is true also of the normative one. We may recognize that our lives have lower degrees of goodness or value than do the Ideas or God and yet at the same time adopt standards of meaningfulness according to which other degrees of goodness or value than those of the Ideas or of God are sufficient for meaningfulness.

Towards the end of his paper, Seachris argues that the distinction between a perspective and a standard as regards the ontological-normative component cannot be upheld by objectivists (2012, pp. 14–15). For the purpose of this discussion, objectivists as regards the meaning of life can be described as those who take their claims about meaningfulness to refer to objectively real, mind-independent states of affairs in the world. Subjectivists, on the other hand, are those who take their claims about meaningfulness to express or refer to their moods or thoughts rather than to objectively real, mind-independent states of affairs in the world. Seachris argues that when objectivists recognize a certain life as meaningful they must hold it to be “really,” objectively meaningful, and thus cannot opt for other, higher or lower, standards for meaningfulness: “neither a person nor her values nor her actions can matter deep down without *mattering deep down*” (2012, p. 14, Seachris’s emphasis). According to Seachris, then, under objectivism, the SSA perspective commits us to endorsing one certain standard of meaningfulness and not others. However, this argument conflates the degree of meaningfulness with the degree of objective reality of that degree of meaningfulness. These should be distinguished, just as we would distinguish between, say, the degree of redness (we may have light, pinkish redness; then somewhat denser redness; and only then “full-blooded” redness) and the degree of objective reality of each of those shades of redness (is this or that degree of redness only in our mind, or does it also exist in the “real,” objective world?). An objectivist may well accept the full objective reality of everything she talks about, but still distinguish between a perspective and a standard. She may believe that there are high degrees of meaningfulness that are objectively real and low degrees of meaningfulness that are also objectively real. Furthermore, she may believe that it is objectively true that her life is at a lower level of meaningfulness, yet hold that this does not render her life meaningless, since her life’s degree of meaningfulness is (objectively) sufficient. She may be an objectivist through and through as regards meaningfulness, degrees of meaningfulness, standards of meaningfulness, and comparisons between degrees of meaningfulness, but still be able to distinguish between perspectives and standards. Note also that hers is not a *sub specie humanitatis* perspective, since she does not overlook or ignore higher degrees of (objective) meaningfulness than hers; she recognizes these higher degrees of meaningfulness, but believes nevertheless that her own is (objectively) sufficient. The distinction between perspectives and standards, then, still holds; it is open for objectivists no less than for subjectivists. Seachris seems to suggest that if one believes that one’s life really (objectively, in a mind-independent way) matters, one has to hold it to matter, or to be meaningful, to an extremely high degree. But this need not be the case.

Clearly, there are cases in which theoretical constraints lead one to adopt a standard that matches one’s perspective. For example, one may note the vastness of space and, because of some theoretical commitments, also hold that a life that affects less than the whole of space

is meaningless. In such a case there will be no need to distinguish between the perspective and the standard; however, they will still be distinct, and the standard will be determined by the theoretical constraints rather than by the perspective itself. Likewise, there may be circumstances in which one will both conceive a high ontological-normative level and, because of various theoretical constraints, hold a standard according to which lives that do not reach that high ontological-normative level are meaningless. The perspective and the standard would still be distinct in such a case, however, since once the theoretical constraints change the standard may change as well, even while the perspective remains stable. Again, the standard will be determined by the theoretical constraint, not by the perspective.⁴

5 Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the specific perspectives from which the meaning of life might be considered are largely independent of each other, and hence the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective is best considered as no more than an “umbrella term” for such perspectives. Analyses of the precise content of the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective are problematic and largely stipulative, as is using the term to argue for the relation between specific perspectives. The ontological-normative component Seachris discusses need not coincide with other perspectives from which the meaning of life might be considered. And even if one endorses the ontological-normative component in order then to present an argument for the meaninglessness of life analogous to the ones presented by Camus, Blackburn, Rescher, and Nagel and critiqued by me, a reply employing the distinction between a perspective and a standard is available.

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⁴ Seachris’s claim that “the distinction between objective and subjective naturalism closely tracks the distinction between SSH and SSA qua the ontological-normative component” (2012, p. 15) is problematic. A subjectivist may well claim that once she realizes the SSA perspective, her inability to affect the future for millions and millions of years makes her *feel* that her life is meaningless, but that this is a subjective sensation, perhaps true only of her, based on a subjective standard that has no objective, mind-independent status. This sensation she has may be sufficient, in her view, to make her life meaningless. Likewise, objectivists may embrace the SSH perspective (because they believe, for example, that it is objectively true that the SSA perspective is irrelevant for humans), and take what they say about it to be objectively true. Rescher and Blackburn, for example, who recommend the endorsement of the SSH perspective, and Nagel, who believes that we cannot but endorse both the SSH and the SSA perspectives, are not subjectivists.

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