

BOOK REVIEW

Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study. BY THADDEUS METZ. (Oxford: OUP, 2013. Pp. xi + 269. Price: £37.50.)

A talk by Susan Wolf in 1997 spurred the then graduate student Thaddeus Metz's interest in the meaning of life, culminating in his *Meaning In Life* (p. v). It's the most comprehensive philosophical analysis of meaning to date. Metz isn't interested in whether the universe has meaning, that is, whether there's a meaning *of life*; rather, he's interested in what constitutes meaning *in a person's life* (p. 3). Meaning is what the lives of Nelson Mandela, Charles Darwin, Pablo Picasso, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, amongst others, have in common (p. 2). Meaning refers to the good, the true, and the beautiful (p. 5). It's distinct from happiness: one can be happy without having a meaningful life, and vice versa (p. 5). And it's distinct from morality: one can be moral without having a meaningful life (*ibid*).

Metz demarcates theories of meaning into two camps: *supernaturalist* and *naturalist*. He further demarcates naturalist theories of meaning into *subjective* and *objective*; and he ultimately defends a *naturalist* objective theory.

A *supernaturalist* theory implies that 'what constitutes, or is at least necessary for, meaning in life is a relationship with a spiritual realm' (p. 79), where a spiritual realm is beyond space and time and contains God and souls. The divine command theory purportedly supports a variety of supernaturalist theories. According to the divine command theory of meaning (DCTM), a person's life has meaning *only if* there are objective moral rules; and there are objective moral rules only if God exists. Metz rejects the traditional criticism of divine command theories, the *Euthyphro* dilemma, which goes something like: if morality were merely the result of God's commands, morality would be arbitrary, not objective, since the mere fact that anyone commands anything is arbitrary. Metz accepts the supernaturalist's response to the dilemma, noting that God's commands are not arbitrary but instead arise from his perfect nature (p. 87). I don't find this response convincing. Suppose God were a perfect being. God's mere commands wouldn't ground morality; rather, the perfect standard that God's commands arise from or cohere with grounds morality. Suppose

you know a certain decision is best for you. You may know what's best for you; but your knowing what's best for you doesn't thereby make it best for you.

Although Metz rejects the *Euthyphro* dilemma, he rejects the DCTM, too. By his lights the DCTM 'evinces a logical incoherence' (p. 88). The incoherence supposedly lies between the following three claims:

- (1) If morality is objective, then God exists;
- (2) We know that morality is objective; and
- (3) We don't know that God exists (p. 88).

If (1) and (2) are true, we should know that God exists; but proponents of the DCTM accept (3), hence the logical incoherence. I believe that this is an original contribution by Metz. He uses the argument several times, ultimately showing that all supernaturalist theories fall victim to it.

Where supernaturalism implies the existence of spiritual properties, *naturalism* implies that meaning is constituted by 'physical properties, ones that inhere upon substance located in space and time, composed of atoms and are best known by scientific methods' (p. 164). *Subjective* naturalists believe that meaning is constituted by having our pro-attitudes obtain (*ibid*). *Objective* naturalists believe that the obtaining of our pro-attitudes alone is insufficient (*Ibid*). Following the literature, Metz shows that subjectivism has 'seriously counterintuitive implications about which lives count as meaningful' (p. 175). The standard version of subjectivism whereby S's life is meaningful to the extent her pro-attitudes obtain is too permissive; it counterintuitively deems Sisyphus' life meaningful because his desire to roll a boulder up a hill is satisfied.

Since both supernaturalist and subjective naturalist theories of meaning are deficient, Metz turns to *objective* naturalist theories, that is, theories that maintain 'a condition is meaningful at least in part because of its inherent physical nature, independent of whether it is believed to be meaningful, desired, liked, or sought out' (p. 180). The most popular such theory—recently defended by Susan Wolf—says that meaning in life is constituted by *subjective attractiveness to objects of worth*. Metz has three objections. First, meaning may be found in having 'negative attitudes towards undesirable conditions such as injustice, sickness, and poverty' (p. 183). Secondly, meaning doesn't require subjective attraction. Think of Mother Teresa; her life seems meaningful even if she didn't have the relevant pro-attitudes towards helping others while she helped them. Thirdly, the notion of 'objective attractiveness' is vague.

Metz's *fundamentality theory of meaning* is meant to compensate for Wolf's theory's shortcomings. It maintains that one's life is more meaningful to the extent that without violating moral constraints person S employs and either positively orients her reason towards fundamental conditions of human existence or negatively orients her reason towards what threatens them (p. 233). By 'reason' Metz means uniquely human capacities of deliberation and decision (p. 223). 'Explaining why things exist and have the properties they do',

‘advancing justice’, ‘desiring not to smoke upon judging it to be harmful’, and ‘liking a work of art’ all exemplify deliberation or decision (*Ibid*). And by ‘fundamental’ Metz means either *metaphysically* fundamental determined by the extent to which it ‘brings about many other events’ (p. 226) or *epistemologically* fundamental determined by the extent to which it ‘accounts for many other judgments in a given context’ (p. 226). To negatively orient oneself is to inhibit or dislike what threatens a fundamental condition of human existence. Interestingly, Metz contends that ‘con-attitudes can confer meaning on life [...] when directed towards the appropriate objects’ (p. 234). Think of hating injustice: if Metz is right, injustice threatens fundamental conditions of human existence and hence your con-attitude towards it makes your life more meaningful; acting against injustice would make it more meaningful even still.

Unlike the aforementioned accounts, Metz’s describes what constitutes anti-meaning (what he calls ‘anti-matter’): one’s life is less meaningful to the extent she employs and either negatively orients her reason towards what promotes fundamental conditions of human existence, or positively orients her reason toward what undermines them (p. 234). ‘Blowing up the Sphinx’, ‘torturing others for fun’, and ‘burning science books’ all exemplify anti-meaning (p. 234).

Metz’s theory seems to be the most plausible of those he discusses; he has made philosophical progress. That said, I have two criticisms. First, there seems to be a tension between on the one hand saying that meaning is distinct from morality while on the other hand saying that meaning can be found *only if* moral constraints are not violated. Secondly, it’s not clear to me that we intuitively believe that a person’s life is more meaningful because of mere subjective attraction. It’s not clear to me that Mother Teresa’s life is more meaningful if she enjoyed the service she provided than if she didn’t enjoy it. Perhaps there are two concepts at work here: (i) how meaningful a person’s life is *for that person* and (ii) how meaningful that life *is*. Surely Mother Teresa may find her life more meaningful if she enjoyed the work she was doing; but it’s not obvious—to me at least—that her life is more meaningful in virtue of her enjoying what she’s doing.

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