

## Author Meets Critic

### Meaning as a Distinct and Fundamental Value: Reply to Kershnar

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I am grateful to Stephen Kershnar for his thoughtful critical notice of my book, *Meaning in Life: An Analytic Study* (Metz 2013), published elsewhere in the current issue of this journal (2014). He provides a succinct and accurate overview of the book's central conclusions, and, while being generous about its contribution to the field, also advances some penetrating criticisms of it that merit engagement. Specifically, Kershnar maintains, first, that I did not provide enough evidence that meaning in life is a genuine value-theoretic category as something distinct from and competing with, say, objective well-being, and, second, that, even if there were a value of meaning in life, my fundamentality theory of it would not capture its essence well. In this article, I reply to both of these criticisms, aiming to probe these underexplored issues still more deeply. I also contend that these two criticisms are in tension with each other; in order to contend that my theory of meaning is incorrect, Kershnar must draw on intuitions about the existence of meaning that undercut his suggestion that there is no such thing.

In *Meaning in Life*, my overarching aims are to articulate a novel theory of what would make a human person's life meaningful and to argue that it is more justified than competitors to be found mainly in the English-speaking philosophical literature from the past 100 or so years. As Kershnar recounts, in the first major part of the book I analyze the category of meaningfulness, defining what we mean by "meaning in life," indicating what the bearer of this value is, and differentiating it from happiness, construed as pleasant experiences. In the next two major parts of the book, I focus on spelling out and evaluating a wide array of theories of life's meaning, basic accounts of what all the meaningful conditions of life have in common as distinct from the meaningless ones. Spe-

cifically, in the second part, I criticize supernaturalist theories of meaning in life, purporting to offer fresh and powerful reasons to doubt them, and in the third part, I present a new naturalist theory that I contend improves upon extant versions of naturalism. My favored view is the fundamentality theory, roughly, the idea that a life is (particularly) meaningful insofar as it positively orients rationality toward basic conditions of human existence, ones that are responsible for or explain much else about it.

Against this large project, Kershnar mounts two important objections. The first one is that I have not done enough in *Meaning in Life* to differentiate meaning from other kinds of final value. Although he acknowledges that I work to show how meaning in life differs from pleasure (in the fourth chapter of the book), Kershnar plausibly contends that there are additional things good for their own sake that I have not yet addressed but should. Specifically, he suspects that there in fact is no category of meaning in life, and that the issues I discuss in the book are, for all I have said, best construed to be matters of either objective well-being or intrinsic value. In the following, I work to show that the good of meaning in life is reducible to neither objective well-being nor intrinsic value.

By "intrinsic value" Kershnar means "the value something has in virtue of its intrinsic properties." Kershnar's hunch is that the good (beneficence), the true (enquiry), and the beautiful (creativity), which I maintain ground exemplars of meaning in life, are rather best understood as intrinsic values, facets of life that are good for their own sake and in virtue of features inherent to the life.

Now, I have in fact addressed this view in the book,

but implicitly and in the context of pleasure (2013: 65–68). There I draw a key distinction between the bearer of meaning in life and its source. The bearer of meaning is in which properties this value inheres, whereas the source of meaning is on which properties meaning logically depends in order to inhere. In the case of meaning, I argue that the bearer and source are not one and the same thing, and that the source of meaning is in fact not solely intrinsic, but instead can logically depend on properties extrinsic to the life. Let me spell this out.

The bearer of meaning in life is in the first instance a life of a human person, with deliberation and action being salient features of life in which meaning inheres. That is, when we say that a person’s “life” is meaningful to a certain degree (or not), normally we are saying that certain thought processes and choices are what exhibit the meaning (or lack of it). For example, whether it is fulfilling God’s purpose, or rearing children with love, or curing a severe illness, or making a scientific discovery, or achieving something at sport, or creating a work of art, or some other quintessential display of meaningfulness, it is typically the features constitutive of personhood that are doing the work, viz., thinking and acting consequent to it (for a similar view, see Brogaard and Smith 2005: 449).

However, sometimes thinking and acting consequent to it are meaningful in virtue of conditions that transcend the properties intrinsic to them. There are two hard-to-question examples illustrating that the source of meaning, i.e., its logical conditions, are sometimes extrinsic to its bearer.

For the first example, it appears that thinking is meaningful only if the thinking has not been controlled by an external source. If one’s thoughts are a product of the plans of an evil demon, a mad scientist, or the Greek gods, then few would say they confer meaning on one’s life, or at least not as much as they would have otherwise (for detailed analysis of this matter, see Pisciotta 2013; see also Kekes 1986: 80–84).

For a second example, consider acting, and how its meaningfulness can be a function of something beyond the acting itself, and, especially, the consequences the action has (foreseeably) caused. The classic case is Van Gogh, where the widespread and positive reception of his artworks after his death plausibly conferred substantial meaning on his having painted

them (Metz 2013: 23, 70).

However, Kershner is skeptical that meaning can come posthumously, and so it would be ideal if I could present cases that do not depend on that suggestion. Consider, then, the digging of a ditch by which one intends to help one’s community (I here draw on Metz 2013: 68). Perhaps there is *some* meaning inherent to the ditch-digging merely insofar as one is doing it with the aim of benefiting others. However, factors extrinsic to the ditch-digging seem substantially able to affect the degree of meaning that most are inclined to ascribe to it. For one, ditch-digging that is likely to achieve the aim of benefiting others seems more meaningful than ditch-digging that has no chance of doing so. For another, ditch-digging that actually achieves the aim of benefiting others seems more meaningful than ditch-digging that was likely to do so but ended up not. What these scenarios indicate is that factors external to one’s action—indeed, to one’s life—can affect the meaning that obtains in it.

Return, now, to Kershner’s hypothesis that considerations that I am inclined to place under the heading of “meaning in life” rather belong under that of “intrinsic value.” It should now be clear that the former is not reducible to the latter. Whereas the latter, for Kershner, is the value something has “in virtue of its intrinsic properties,” I have provided strong evidence indicating that value naturally associated with talk of “meaning in life” does not obtain solely in virtue of the intrinsic properties of the life of a person. In particular, deliberation and action, central to a person’s life, can be meaningful in virtue of what cause them and what they in turn (are likely to) cause, conditions extrinsic to them (for additional discussion, see Brogaard and Smith 2005: 450–453; Metz 2005: 327–329).

Here I turn to Kershner’s other suggestion about why one ought to doubt that there is anything such as meaning in life. Even if I have shown that value associated with talk of the latter is not reducible to a life’s intrinsic properties, it still might be the case that it is nothing other than what goes under the heading of “objective well-being.” Kershner defines this value as “something that makes a person’s life go better independent of pleasure and desire-fulfillment,” citing Derek Parfit’s influential typology of theories about what makes a life go well. Kershner maintains that insofar as things such as “knowledge, agency, contact

with reality, and virtue” are often deemed to be objectively good for a person, there is as yet no reason to think there exists another category of meaning in life that is distinct from it.

This is a particularly formidable suggestion, one that it will be revealing to rebut (the next few paragraphs draw on ideas in Metz 2012: 443-444). For an initial reply, I submit that a person’s life would be more meaningful if she voluntarily underwent a life lacking in objective goods so that others would not have to undergo the same fate. If such a thought experiment is coherent, then the meaningful and the objectively good are clearly distinct!

I doubt that this quick and dirty reply will convince on its own. Let me therefore appeal to some intuitions to drive the point home. It is commonly thought that meaning in a person’s life can come from sacrificing her own well-being for the sake of others. Kershner might be inclined to think that subjective well-being is alone what can be given up so as to obtain meaning, but it also appears possible to obtain meaning by directing objective well-being away from oneself and toward others.

For a first case, think about someone who volunteers to be head of department, taking on mind-numbing administrative burdens and attending dull meetings so that his colleagues can avoid doing so and can instead realize objective goods. Although his life might have been more meaningful had he not taken on this job, it does plausibly accrue some decent share of meaning for having done so, viz., for having undergone boredom and a lack of objective goods so that others could realize the opposite conditions.

Kershner might reply that the administrator is sacrificing some kinds of objective well-being for another sort that will obtain in his life. However, I submit that the case is not naturally described in this fashion. In addition, this maneuver will not work for the following case. Consider individuals who commit suicide for a good cause, such as protecting innocents. Take a classic lifeboat scenario where there are not enough seats for all those who need them, and where you volunteer to give yours to someone else—a meaningful action, albeit not one that would foster objective flourishing on your part.

To sum up so far, one way to see the difference be-

tween meaning in life and objective well-being is that the former can be enhanced by reductions of the latter, particularly when voluntarily undertaken to improve others’ lives. The lifeboat scenario occasions an additional way to see the difference between the two values: objective flourishing is something that (only) makes a life worth living, but, while meaning can of course be something worth living for, it can also be something worth dying for. Some meaningful conditions are naturally understood to provide reasons to commit suicide or to let oneself die, probably since dying might impart certain narrative qualities to one’s life or produce good consequences for others’ lives. In short, well-being of whatever sort invariably makes a life worth continuing, whereas meaning can sometimes make a life worth ending. Or at least that is one compelling way to cut up the value-theoretic territory.

Kershner notes that I do not indicate how to weigh the good of meaning against other sorts of goods. That is true, mainly since I doubt there are any firm principles to be advanced on this score. However, as a rule of thumb, one probably ought to seek out a *balanced* distribution of goods in one’s life, where a variety of them are each realized to a substantial degree. Usually, a life with a decent amount of subjective well-being, objective well-being, and meaning would be preferable to a life exhibiting only one of them, even to a great extent.

So far, I have replied to Kershner’s first major objection to my book, that there is not sufficient reason to believe that meaning in life is a genuine category of final goodness, one distinct from both intrinsic value and objective well-being. Kershner has a second major objection, which I now address. It is that, even if there is, *ex hypothesi*, a category of meaning in life different from other final goods, I have failed to account for its nature well with my fundamentality theory.

One reason Kershner deems the fundamentality theory to be objectionable is that he finds it, in his words, to be “very pluralistic.” This theory holds that meaning can inhere in parts of a life, such as particular actions, as well as in life as whole. And for both dimensions, the theory posits more than a single criterion for the amount of meaning they can each exhibit. The parts of a life are more meaningful, the more they, without involving certain degrading behaviors, exhibit sophisticated rational processes and then ones that are positively oriented toward fundamental objects (by

which I mean conditions of human life responsible for much else about characteristic human life). And a life as a whole is more meaningful, the more it develops in various ways, e.g., not merely by ending on a high note, but also by the earlier bad in life having caused the later good.

Although I agree with Kershnar that the theory is complex, it is not obviously right to call it “pluralist.” The monism/pluralism distinction is not equivalent to the simple/complex distinction. To invoke well-known examples in moral theory, utilitarianism is both monist and simple, while W. D. Ross’s particularism is both pluralist and complex. However, an ethic according to which one should merely avoid violating the self-ownership rights of persons and causing suffering to non-persons would be pluralist but fairly simple. And it is plausible to suggest that Kant’s formula of universal law is monist and yet complex. According to Kant, there is a single principle that entails and plausibly explains all particular duties, but the elements of the principle (“Act only on maxims that can be universalized without frustrating purposes, whether the particular purpose of a given maxim or the ability to achieve purposes generally”) involve more properties than just, say, maximizing pleasure in the long run.

I think of the fundamentality theory of meaning as analogous in form to Kant’s moral theory, i.e., monist but not simple. The fundamentality theory is monist in that a single principle is postulated as being able to capture a wide array of comparatively less controversial data about what makes a life meaningful. However, it is not a simple theory, for the reasons Kershnar points out. There are a number of elements to it, where, roughly, a life is more meaningful, the more of these elements are built upon each other. Not only are there many parts to the theory, the parts are related to each other, too.

Kershnar contends that a theory with “many independent factors” is to be avoided “unless there is clear indication” that they are needed to capture the data. Fair enough. But I take the intricate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of competing theories in the bulk of my book to provide the clear indication. Nothing simple is likely to capture intuitions as variegated as the following ones (among many others) addressed in the book: if God existed, a relationship with Him would enhance meaning in one’s life; *ceteris paribus*, there is more meaning in one’s life when one

exhibits a virtue to a certain degree than when one enables another to display it to the same degree; more meaning would come from having created a great work of art than from apprehending one created by someone else; repetition generally undercuts meaning in life; although one ought not, on grounds of meaning, produce bad so as to enable good to flow from it, if bad has come, then one ought to see what good can come of it; blowing up the Sphinx for the fun of it would be worse from the perspective of meaning than oversleeping.

Some would also deny that anything monist is likely to capture these and still more intuitions about meaning or the lack of it. However, in my book I have worked to see how far one can get with a single principle. As I say there, one can know with confidence that monism is false only by first developing its most promising instances and seeing how well they account for the data, something philosophers have begun to do in earnest only recently (2013: 7).

Kershnar’s second reason for doubting the fundamentality theory concerns not its form, but rather its content. He argues that it is “over-intellectualized” for making reasoning the centerpiece of what confers meaning on a life. One might say that the fundamentality theory of meaning is similar to Kant’s morality in virtue of more than merely form; it deems much of what makes life meaningful to be a matter of rationality, especially deliberation and action. And it is indeed fair of Kershnar to doubt that a significant life is truly best understood as a rational life (of a certain sort).

Here, Kershnar posits the case of a peasant woman in a Jewish *shtetl* who does not engage in in-depth reasoning and is happy just to accept what her rabbi tells her is true. She has a good marriage and three happy daughters, all of whom also have good marriages and three healthy children each. Her life is filled with love, laughter, family, and tradition. Kershnar invites me to compare this woman’s life to another’s, namely, that of a superb violinist and philosopher, who engages in sophisticated reasoning about fundamental matters and whose ideas are widely read and influential. This woman has married late, has a strained relation with her adopted daughter, and has comparatively little love, laughter, family, and tradition in her life. Kershnar maintains that the former has more meaning in her life than the latter, which my theory cannot explain.

*Contra* Kershner, I am not confident that the former's life is more meaningful than the latter's. In addition, there are many philosophers who, unlike me, would *firmly* conclude that the latter's is in fact more meaningful (e.g., Russell 1912: 153-161; Smith 1997: 201; Levy 2005; Mintoff 2008: 80-84).

However, the deeper point is that Kershner cannot see how my theory can accommodate the idea that the two lives are even *comparable* in degree of meaning. My focus on rationality seems entirely to exclude considerations of "love, laughter, family, and tradition," and decidedly to favor music and philosophy. My theory therefore appears unable to account even for the intuition that the peasant woman has some decent share of meaning in her life (setting aside Kershner's suggestion that her life is more meaningful than the philosopher-musician's).

In formulating the fundamentality theory, I did not intend to exclude what Kershner suspects I must. In fact, I especially wanted to account for the intuitions that loving, familial and similar relationships can confer meaning on a life (2013: 121-122, 144, 170-174, 201-207, 216, 223-228). Let me explain, then, how I believe the theory can do so, and without "stretching (it) past the breaking point," which Kershner surmises it cannot.

Consider: animals cannot love. To love means to empathize, to consider what it is like to be another person. To love also means to sympathize, to exhibit emotions that parallel another's quality of life, viz., feeling positive toward the other's well-being and negative toward her woe. To love, further, means to act in ways likely to improve the other's quality of life and to do so for her sake, not merely for one's own long-term good. Still more, to love means to identify with another person, thinking of oneself as part of a "we" and not so much as an "I." In addition, it means taking pride in the other's accomplishments and feeling shame for her failures. To love intensely means beholding the other, where such emotion includes the judgments that the other is good and that it would be desirable for her to exist and to flourish. Finally, to love intensely means feeling secure enough to make oneself vulnerable, revealing innermost facets of oneself. Animals can do none of this, with not even chimpanzees coming close to the degree that a human person can, and the best explanation of the difference is that love is in fact a collection of different forms

of intelligence, as I maintain at various points in the book (2013: 121, 201-202, 214, 216, 223-224, 228).

Kershner and others are tempted to divorce loving from reasoning since the former characteristically includes exhibiting feelings, desires and emotions, which, at least since Kant, the field has often deemed to be separate from rationality, the domain of universal principles or necessary inferences. However, rationality is best understood to be broader than that, viz., to consist of the more general abilities to apprehend data, to remember it, to synthesize it, to evaluate it, and, of particular relevance, to adjust one's various mental states in light of it. Those affective, conative and emotive conditions that can be influenced by cognitive ones, or can be sensibly subject to criticism, or can be "judgment-sensitive attitudes" (the useful phrase from Scanlon 1998: 18-22), plausibly count as "rational." Or at least that is the way that I use the term in the book (2013: 222-224).

Furthermore, love of the particularly meaningful sort consists of various rational processes that are positively oriented toward a certain object, namely, the fundamental conditions of a human person's existence. When we love someone in a way that is significant, we are not merely attracted to her appearance or other intuitively surface features. Instead, we get deep, loving what is basic to her, what makes her tick. The fundamental conditions of a representative person's life, i.e., what are substantially responsible for or explain a large degree of its course, are roughly a matter of the ways one reasons in the context of relating (2013: 227-228, 236-237). More carefully, what are fundamental to one's existence are one's final ends or intrinsic desires exhibited upon reflection, action and other rational engagement with styles, values and norms that one has apprehended consequent to being in a community—in a word, one's character.

I hope at this point the reader appreciates why I think that the fundamentality theory can account for the meaningfulness of love. To love, at least in ways that noticeably confer meaning, is (at least in large part) to exhibit attitudes that can be influenced by judgment and to direct them in supportive ways toward a person's character. That, I maintain, is well captured by the broader idea of meaning being constituted by contouring one's rationality toward fundamentality. Although there are of course problems facing the fundamentality theory (for some discussion, see Landau

2013; Metz 2013: 238–239, 2014), I do not believe that accounting for the significance of love, family and culture is one of the most worrisome.

As for the purported inability of the fundamentality theory to account for laughter, my strategy should at this point be clear: laughter is a properly human activity, which is best explained by it being an instance of rationality. In particular, I am drawn toward the view that much of what we laugh at is, roughly, the awareness of incongruity or an unexpected switch from one pattern to another, so that it counts as a form of creativity (on which see the under-appreciated Koestler 1964).

To go a step farther, it would be ideal for me to provide a theory of the most desirable content of laughter and other kinds of humor, and, specifically, to show that the best sort of comedy is about matters fundamental to human existence. At this point I lack such a theory. However, I submit that it would be interesting to consider this possibility as what differentiates, say, the humor of Woody Allen and Kurt Vonnegut from slapstick and farting.

Having responded to each of Kershnar's two most substantial criticisms, I make one final point about them, namely, that there is some incoherence in having advanced them together. On the one hand, Kershnar doubts that meaning in life is a genuine value-theoretic category, while, on the other, he maintains that the fundamentality theory fails to capture what makes a life meaningful.

Now, in order to defend the latter point, Kershnar appeals to intuitions about what makes life meaningful and to what degree, which appears to be in tension with his skepticism about whether there is such a thing as meaning. Recall from above that Kershnar claimed to know that a peasant woman who laughs, loves, and is part of a tradition has more meaning in her life than one who is fairly isolated and intellectual. In addition, Kershnar doubts that much, if any, meaning can come posthumously, as well as makes a judgment about what would make God's life meaningful.

I submit that he, and readers more generally, must pick one objection or the other. Although I appreciate the opportunity I have been given to respond here to both of Stephen Kershnar's two most important criticisms of my book, it appears that, at the very least, he

cannot have succeeded on both points.

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