The Concept of a Meaningful Life
Author(s): Thaddeus Metz
Source: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Apr., 2001), pp. 137-153
Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of North American Philosophical Publications
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20010030
Accessed: 21/02/2009 04:42

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY
Volume 38, Number 2, April 2001

THE CONCEPT OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE

Thaddeus Metz

Well, my goodness, "What is the meaning of life?" you ask. What is the meaning of "meaning" in your question? And whose life? A worm's?

—John Updike[1]

I. INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF "MEANING"

Compared with the questions of what constitutes happiness or rightness, contemporary normative theorists have done little to address the question of what constitutes meaningfulness.[2] This lack of interest is unjustified, for a theory of life's meaning would help to answer the following important questions, among many others: Why might a good marriage be considered more desirable than a great one-night stand? In what sense do strong candidates for euthanasia have "nothing left to live for"? What disadvantages are there to living in a highly industrialized, consumer society? What makes certain kinds of knowledge worth pursuing? Which attitudes should one have toward the prospect of one's death? Why might people need God in their lives? Is there any independent reason for being moral? What should the goal of psychotherapy be? How do the arts figure into the best life?

This essay does not answer any of these questions or even present a theory of life's meaning that could. Instead, it focuses on the prior issue of what a theory of life's meaning is about. One reason for the lack of systematic answers given to the question of life's meaning is surely that, as Updike notes, this question is imprecise and unclear. What are we asking when we ask whether and how a life is meaningful? Insofar as the answer to this second-order question is murky, theorists will be loathe to address the first-order question. To help advance inquiry, then, this paper aims to clarify what we are asking when posing the question of what (if anything) makes a life meaningful.

People associate many different ideas with talk of "meaning," so that one must search for an account of the question that is primary in some way. Therefore, after sketching in section II the major conceptions

of life's meaning in 20th century philosophical literature, the remainder of the paper seeks a satisfactory analysis of the concept of a meaningful life that these conceptions all address. In sections III and IV, the paper argues against two major kinds of analyses that are suggested by others' remarks. Next, in section V, the essay develops and critically examines a new analysis that avoids the problems facing the two extant accounts. In section VI, the paper concludes by noting the ramifications of this discussion for future research into the meaning of life.

II. Concept and Conceptions of Meaning

To achieve the goal of articulating what we are asking when inquiring into the meaning of life, it of course will not do merely to say that a meaningful life is a life that is "important" or "significant" or that it is an existence that "matters" or "has a point." These terms are synonyms of "meaningful." This paper is pursuing something more revealing than just enumerating terms that have a sense identical (or very similar) to that of the word "meaningful."[3] This essay instead seeks to expound this sense.

However, people associate different senses with the terms "meaningful life," and so this project must specify whose sense is to be articulated. This paper therefore aims to spell out the conceptual element that is at the core of 20th century philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. This essay seeks to analyze the concept that is common to the conceptions of life's meaning to be found in at least the Anglo-American philosophical literature. A *conception* of life's meaning is a theory of what makes a life meaningful. It is a general, fundamental, and systematic account of the conditions that constitute a significant existence. A conception of what makes life meaningful aims to describe the "underlying structure" of a significant existence in as few principles as possible. In contrast, the *concept* of a meaningful life is what the competing conceptions of a meaningful life are about. The concept of life's meaning is that which makes a given theory one of meaningfulness as opposed to, say, one of rightness or happiness.

One might have a prima facie worry about the project of seeking to articulate a concept that is common to the major philosophical conceptions of meaning. Specifically, there may be little reason for thinking that there in fact exists such a concept. Taking a cue from Wittgenstein and contemporary discussions of vagueness, one might reasonably suspect that there are no essential conditions for a theory to be about meaning as opposed to something else.

Perhaps there are not. However, it would be terribly interesting if there did turn out to be a single notion about which the many substantive theories of meaning are in dispute. And one can claim to know with robust justification that there is no unitary concept common to the diverse conceptions of meaning only after thoroughly searching for one—which has yet to be done. Furthermore, even if there turned out to be no such concept, searching for one would still enrich our understanding of what contemporary philosophical inquiry into life's meaning is about.

So, let us see how far we can get. What follows is an overview of the debate about life's meaning that one finds in 20th century analytic philosophy. The sundry views from the literature can be placed under one of three major headings. These three kinds of theories are not committed to saying that life is in fact significant; rather, they are accounts of what would constitute a meaningful life, were it to exist. Furthermore,

these theories are not accounts solely of what would make life as a whole or on balance meaningful. They are instead in the first instance accounts of what would make a life meaningful in some respect or to some degree.[4]

Supernaturalism is one such theory. On this view, one's existence is significant only if one has a certain relation with some purely spiritual being or realm. If neither a god nor a soul existed, or if they existed but one failed to relate to them in the right way, then one's life would be utterly meaningless. There are several familiar types of supernaturalism. For example, justice theory says that meaning lies in conforming to God's purposes, which are the source of justice in this world, or doing good deeds and receiving one's just deserts in the next world. Perfection theory holds that one's life is meaningful by virtue of honoring one's higher, spiritual nature while on earth, or attaining the stage where one will commune with the highest conceivable being upon leaving the earth. Theists in the existentialist tradition, including Leo Tolstoy, Soren Kierkegaard, Emil Fackenheim, and Martin Buber,[5] are the ones who most prominently hold supernaturalism. Several analytically oriented philosophers have recently articulated or espoused the view,[6] and lay people frequently express such ideas. One often hears something like, "What is the point of living (or living in a particular way) if I will not survive the death of my body?"

Naturalism is the contradictory of supernaturalism. A naturalist account denies that life's meaning is contingent on the existence of a purely spiritual order. Naturalists can grant that relating to a god or a soul could confer meaning on a life; they simply dispute that such a relation is a necessary condition of a life's having any meaning.

Subjectivism is one of two sorts of naturalism worth distinguishing. This view holds that meaningful conditions vary, depending on the subject. Subjectivism maintains that what is meaningful for a given person is a function of that toward which she (or her group) has (or would have) a certain pro-attitude, e.g., wanting something and getting it, or setting something as an end and achieving it. William James, A. J. Ayer, Richard Taylor, Bernard Williams, and Stephen Darwall are some 20th century subjectivists about meaning.[7] Of these thinkers, Taylor has been addressed most, his discussion of Sisyphus being particularly engaging. Taylor and other subjectivists often defend their view by appealing to the intuitive claim that a life filled with boredom or frustration could not avoid being meaningless. The problem with Sisyphus, according to Taylor, is that he is not satisfied rolling a rock up a hill. Once we imagine Sisyphus with an intense desire to do what he must do, then it appears to Taylor that his life is filled with as much meaning as anyone could want.

Those who hold naturalistic *objectivism* question this appraisal of Sisyphus. Robert Nozick, David Wiggins, Charles Taylor, Peter Singer, and Susan Wolf are contemporary objectivists about life's meaning.[8] They say that certain features of our natural lives can make them meaningful, but not merely in virtue of any pro-attitude toward them. They tend to find objectivism plausible for two reasons. One thought is that not just any condition could confer meaning on a life, no matter what the pro-attitude toward it; a life simply cannot matter for rolling a rock, however much that is wanted or chosen. The second intuition is that exemplary lives of meaning, say, those of Einstein or Ghandi, do not seem fundamentally to depend on a god or a soul. Instead, supererogatory actions,

scientific discoveries, artistic creations, and loving relationships seem able to enhance the significance of a life, even in the absence of a purely spiritual order.

These, then, are the major theories of meaning that one encounters in the literature. Almost all philosophical discussion of meaning can be understood as an articulation, defense, or critique of these three theories. However, not all of it can be. Supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism are accounts of what would make an *individual's* life meaningful. Some philosophers have addressed the different issue of the meaning of the human race or the universe.[9] Furthermore, these three theories are *normative.* Those who hold these theories construe them as accounts of something that would be intrinsically good to have in one's life (or of something that provides a basic reason for action). Some philosophers have addressed a contrasting notion of meaning that is merely descriptive, lacking inherent desirability or choiceworthiness.[10] In sum, to the extent that a discussion of life's meaning does not take meaning to be one aspect of the best life for a person, it gets set aside here. This paper's goal is to analyze the concept of meaning relevant to the normative status of individual lives.

Taking for granted that supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism are the major conceptions of meaning, there are two clear criteria for an analysis of the concept of meaning. First, an analysis of the concept of meaning should allow for the logical possibility of supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism being conceptions of meaning. If an analysis of the concept implied that one of these three theories (or a clear instance of them) were not an account of meaning at all, we would have serious grounds for questioning the analysis.

In addition to giving us conditions that fit *all* theories of meaning, an analysis ideally ought, second, to indicate conditions that fit *only* theories of meaning. An analysis should single out the intrinsic good of meaning from other intrinsic goods. For example, the question of what would make a life meaningful differs from other normative questions such as what would make a life happy or moral. At least in contemporary discourse, inquiring into the nature of happiness is inherently to ask about something substantially mental. The question of what makes a life meaningful is different, as can be gleaned from the common-sensical judgment that time spent in the orgasmatron (a machine inducing the feeling of orgasm) is a prima facie good candidate for happiness but not for meaningfulness. Asking about the nature of dutiful action is, very roughly, to ask about impartial behavior for which the agent would warrant criticism if not done. The extensions of the best answers to the question of what makes an act morally required and the question of what makes life meaningful may overlap (and could even be identical). However, the intensions of these two questions differ, as can be seen from the fact that making a great scientific discovery (that promises no practical benefits) is a prima facie good candidate for being a meaningful action but not for being a morally required action. Therefore, if a proposed analysis failed to indicate the respect in which supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism are all accounts of meaning rather than of happiness or of duty, that would be a strike against the analysis.

III. Purposiveness

There is an a priori connection between meaning and purpose, at least in that "purposive" is one synonym of "meaningful."

Since there are rich associations with the term "purpose," it is worth exploring whether some notion of purposiveness could ground a revealing analysis of the concept of a meaningful life.

Fulfilling God's Purpose

According to Bertrand Russell, "Unless you assume a God, the question (of life's meaning) is meaningless, and, like Laplace, 'je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothese.'"[11] Of those who have analyzed the concept of meaning in terms of relating to God, most have supposed that inquiring into the meaning of an individual's life is identical to asking how a person is related to a purpose that God has assigned. This view gains plausibility from the fact that the question of life's meaning is often associated with the question, "Why am I here?" and this question, in turn, is naturally understood as asking for the reason for which one was created.

Some might have exclusively theistic ideas in mind when inquiring about the meaning of life, but they will not do as an analysis of the concept that underlies contemporary philosophical dispute about the issue. The obvious problem with the present understanding of the concept of a meaningful life is that it a priori excludes the possibility of naturalist conceptions of meaning (and also supernaturalist conceptions that do not appeal to God). If asking about life's meaning logically involves asking about one's relation to God's purpose, then no naturalist theory of significance is conceptually possible and naturalists and supernaturalists are talking past each other. However, there are many naturalist accounts in the literature, accounts that supernaturalists have argued provide inadequate answers to the question of life's significance. This question therefore cannot itself be understood in supernaturalist terms.

Realizing Proper Human Purposes

Instead of analyzing the concept of a meaningful life in terms of God's purpose, some philosophers have done so in terms of the purposes of human (or rational) beings. Kai Nielsen has most clearly articulated the position that to inquire about the meaning of life is merely to ask which purposes a person should adopt and realize:

> When we ask: "What is the meaning of life?" or "What is the purpose of human existence?" we are normally asking, as I have already said, questions of the following types: "What should we seek?" "What ends—if any—are worthy of attainment?" . . . (T)his question is in reality a question concerning human conduct.[12]

On this analysis, the concept of a meaningful life is one of a life that has done well at achieving goals that humans should strive to achieve. This analysis implies that different conceptions of a meaningful life are to be understood as competing theories of the ends that humans should pursue. Roughly, typical supernaturalists say that humans should fulfill the purpose God has assigned them, many subjectivists maintain that people should adopt whatever goals they are inclined to upon reflection, and standard objectivists hold that one should further the ends of truth, beauty, and goodness. It would appear, then, that the present analysis provides a nice account of what the three major theories of life's meaning have in common.

However, this analysis is flawed in not admitting the logical possibility of a person's life being meaningful in virtue of conditions that she cannot control. For example, consider an "aristocratic" theory of meaning according to which one's life is significant by virtue of having been born into a certain family. Being part of a particular bloodline might be thought to make one's life matter, but this is not an end that

an individual can pursue. This essentialist view does not seem logically contradictory, which the present analysis implies is the case. For another example, consider people who think their lives are meaningful because they are God's chosen people. Being deemed special by God is not a state of affairs that an individual can bring about (let us suppose), so that the conceptual possibility of its conferring meaning on a life cannot be accommodated by analyzing meaning in terms of ends that should be adopted and realized.

One way to respond on behalf of the present analysis would be to suggest that even these conditions may in a broad sense be said to be "chosen," insofar as a person chooses to stay alive. However, such a response merely buys a little time, since the examples may be effectively reformulated. For instance, this maneuver would not work for the view that meaning comes from God's loving one's immortal soul.

Another response would be to bite the bullet and maintain that it is in fact logically contradictory to suppose that meaning can ever be utterly bestowed rather than chosen. The problem with this response is that a number of people have believed that, say, being considered special by God could conceivably make a person's life more meaningful. Interests in being charitable and in finding an analysis that is historically continuous with the way people have used the term "meaningful" both counsel against denying that a theory is about meaning when many have deemed it to be. For these reasons, if essentialist views seem dubious, then they are better construed as substantively false than as logically contradictory. In any event, it is worth considering whether there is an analysis of the concept of meaning that can accommodate the logical possibility of meaning being something that is endowed instead of pursued.

Producing Good States of Affairs

Sometimes purposiveness is understood in terms of having a function. So, one might suggest that the concept of a meaningful life is that of an existence that plays a role in the realization of valuable ends. G. E. Moore suggests such a view when he says,

> I have been very much puzzled as to the meaning of the question "What is the meaning or purpose of life?" . . . But at last it occurred to me that perhaps the vague words of this question are often used to mean no more than "What is the use of a man's life?" . . . A man's life is of some use, if and only if the *intrinsic* value of the Universe as a whole (including past, present, and future) is greater, owing to the existence of his actions and experiences, than it would have been if, other things being equal, those actions and experiences had never existed.[13]

It is not clear whether Moore's statement about a person's being useful insofar as she promotes intrinsic value is intended to be part of the thin concept of meaning or a thick conception of it. Deeming it to be inherent to the concept is reasonable, since if a meaningful life is one that is useful, it presumably will be useful in a relevant sense only insofar as it produces intrinsic value. To think of a meaningful life as one that is useful for ends, regardless of whether they are intrinsically valuable or not, would fail to account for the normative element of meaning. Therefore, it is best to read Moore's remarks as suggesting that we analyze the concept of a significant life in terms of an existence that promotes intrinsically valuable states of affairs.

The present analysis straightforwardly avoids the problems facing the previous two attempts to cash out meaning in terms of purpose. Since it has a wide conception of valuable end in terms of intrinsic goodness that is promoted, the present analysis does not logically tie meaningful conditions to

rational choice. It allows for the possibility of a person's life becoming more meaningful merely by constituting or causing a good state of affairs, where this state of affairs need not have been the product of a voluntary decision. Furthermore, the present analysis obviously does not make supernaturalism a priori true. Supernaturalism may instead, on the view under consideration, be seen as a competing substantive account of the intrinsic value that a meaningful life promotes. Very roughly, supernaturalists would think of the relevant intrinsic value in terms of God's will or nature, subjectivists would construe intrinsic value in terms of preference fulfillment, and objectivists would have a mind-independent account of the good. The present analysis therefore provides a prima facie attractive account of the subject matter common to at least central strands of supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism.

Despite these advantages, the present analysis is questionable. First off, it might fail to account adequately for the normative element of meaning. How can this be, when the Moorean account logically ties meaning to intrinsic value? The worry is that it might link these ideas in the wrong way. Recall that meaning theorists typically think of meaning as itself an intrinsic value. Now, the present analysis construes meaning as conceptually a matter of promoting intrinsic value. But to promote intrinsic value is to have extrinsic value. Hence, the present analysis of meaning construes it as a matter of having extrinsic value, which seems not to cohere well with the intuition that meaning has intrinsic value.

The problem is not easily resolved by noting that some things, e.g., eating a meal, are both good for their own sake and good for what they bring about. The puzzle is that the present analysis conceives of meaning as having final value *insofar as* it has instrumental value. In contrast, consuming a meal is not intrinsically good *to the extent that* it is extrinsically good. Eating a green curry dish is good for its own sake in that it is pleasurable, and it is good as a means in that it helps us to stay alive; it is not good for its own sake insofar as it helps us stay alive. But if the concept of a meaningful life is that of a life that promotes intrinsic value, then a meaningful life is intrinsically valuable because it promotes intrinsic value, i.e., because it is extrinsically valuable. That is strange.

Christine Korsgaard and Shelly Kagan have discussed in some detail the idea that intrinsic value might supervene on an object's relational properties.[14] An attractive example of this is an object's having intrinsic value because of its rarity. Kagan takes a further step, noting that if the relational properties of an object can affect whether an object is good for its own sake, then it will be reasonable to expect that instrumentally valuable relational properties can too. Help and creativity are examples that make plausible the idea of an intrinsically valuable extrinsic value. Imagine that one finds a cure for cancer. Supposing this is a meaningful action and hence is intrinsically valuable, it appears that its intrinsic value consists largely in the fact that a cure has the effect of benefiting people. Or imagine that one produces great works of art. Making artworks is simply behavior that produces intrinsically valuable art-objects (or perhaps produces art-objects capable of producing intrinsically valuable experiences). And if one thinks of making art as meaningful and intrinsically worthwhile, then it appears to be an action that is good for its own sake by virtue of the distinct intrinsic good it promotes. If these instances of meaningful activities are plausible examples of intrinsically valuable extrinsic value, then there is no reason to question an analysis that conceives of meaning generally in these terms. So,

perhaps there is nothing ultimately paradoxical about the claim that the concept of a meaningful life, and hence of a life with a certain intrinsic value, is just that of a life that promotes intrinsic value.

Although there remains much to question about the coherence of conceiving of a sort of intrinsic value in terms of extrinsic value, there are in fact more serious problems facing the present analysis. For one, it is too broad to be able to distinguish meaningfulness from, say, happiness. Happiness is intrinsically valuable, and is so even if it is not part of a meaningful condition. For example, enjoying an ice cream cone is good for its own sake. Since a happy life is also one that promotes intrinsic value, conceiving of meaning merely as a matter of promoting intrinsic value fails to differentiate the idea of a meaningful life from that of a happy life. A more satisfactory account of the concept of meaning would specify *which* intrinsic values must be promoted in order for meaning to arise.

In addition to having trouble entailing that only theories of meaning count as such, the present analysis has difficulty showing that all theories of meaning count as such. Analyzing the concept of meaning in terms of the promotion of intrinsic value is to think of meaning as an inherently teleological relation, implying that deontological conceptions of meaning are not logically possible. But there are theories that on the face of it are accounts of what makes a life matter but that do not articulate a way to promote intrinsic value. For example, some objectivist views hold that life has significance for treating rational nature with respect.[15] Now, these views usually do think of rational nature as being intrinsically valuable, and they could think of the act of honoring such a nature as promoting intrinsic value. The point is that such views need neither think of meaning as consisting in the bare fact of having such a nature, nor conceive of honoring such a nature as promoting intrinsic value. Instead, these views can and do deem meaning to consist of not degrading the higher self, of treating it as more important than the sensual self, where this treatment is not a matter of promoting intrinsic value. If it is logically possible to conceive of honoring people's intellectual selves as making one's life meaningful *and* to deny that such honoring promotes intrinsic value, then the concept of meaning is not merely the idea of promoting intrinsic value.

In sum, the best version of the purpose analysis has faced two major problems. First, it has been too narrow in being unable to accommodate deontological theories that are about meaning. Second, it has been too broad; conceiving of meaning in terms of the promotion of valuable states of affairs fails to distinguish meaning from happiness. One might try to solve the first problem by suggesting that a meaningful life is one that either promotes or honors intrinsic value; that squarely accommodates deontological theories. The problem with this suggestion is that the analysis is still too narrow. Consider the view that meaning is a matter of engaging in intrinsically worthwhile activities and *enjoying* it.[16] In response, one might propose that the concept of a meaningful life is the idea of one that promotes or honors or likes intrinsic value. But this is unattractive. Such a disjunctive analysis is far from the unitary idea that this essay is seeking. Furthermore, such an analysis seems no longer a function of a notion of purposiveness. The concern also obtains with regard to responses to the second problem. That is, in order to differentiate meaning from happiness and other intrinsic values, one might try to specify exactly which sort

of intrinsic value is relevant to meaning. The trouble is that, once this is done, it seems no longer to be an idea of purposiveness that is doing the work. The upshot of this discussion is that an analysis with these two features should be sought: a precise specification of the intrinsic value relevant to meaning and a broad but unified conception of the way to respond to this value.

IV. Transcendence

Another major analysis of the concept of a meaningful life can be gleaned from some of Robert Nozick's remarks.[17] It is not clear that Nozick is intending to provide an analysis of the concept of meaning. However, it does not matter what Nozick's aims are, for his comments provide a prima facie attractive analysis of the concept in terms of transcending limits. The initial motivation for construing theories of meaning as providing substantive accounts of how properly to transcend limits comes from reflection on the use of the word "meaning" (and "significance") in other contexts. If we ask for the meaning of a word, we are told about its relationship with other words or with objects in the world. If we ask what inflation means for the economy, we are told about its effects on something else such as unemployment or interest rates. Robert Nozick proposes that we likewise think of asking for the meaning of a life as a matter of asking how it "connects up to what is outside it."[18]

In order to evaluate this proposal, we need to sharpen it. Exactly which limits are relevant to the issue of life's being significant and how must one cross them? Breaking the speed limit and pinching a stranger are ways of "crossing boundaries" or "transcending limits," but these actions are not prima facie candidates for meaning. Conceiving of meaning as merely a function of connection with something external does not capture the normative dimension of meaning, and, in any event, does not express anything unique to meaning.

Connecting with External Value

Consider this proposal: the concept of what makes a life meaningful is the idea of connecting with something intrinsically valuable beyond one's person. As Nozick also says, "meaning is a transcending of the limits of your own value, a transcending of your own limited value."[19] People often think of meaning in terms of an intense relationship with something greater than oneself, where "greater" has a normative dimension.

One way of connecting with superior intrinsic value external to one's person would be to promote it, but this need not be the only way. Supposing that the words "connecting" and "transcending" mean something like responding positively, one could also connect with value beyond oneself by honoring it or by enjoying its production. In addition, since one's happiness is clearly an intrinsic value internal to one's person, the present analysis is able to distinguish meaning from happiness. Hence, the transcendence analysis avoids both of the fundamental problems facing the purpose analysis.

However, there are counterexamples that tell against this version of the transcendence analysis. Consider supernaturalist theories that maintain that a person's life is meaningful insofar as she honors her soul or realizes what she essentially is.[20] Since neither honoring one's higher self nor becoming aware of one's deepest nature is to connect with a value external to oneself, the present analysis counterintuitively implies that these activities are conceptually incapable of making a life meaningful. There are objectivist theories, too, that the

present analysis wrongly implies are not theories of meaning at all. Consider these examples: publicly standing by what one reflectively believes to be right, being true to oneself, overcoming addiction, and not letting oneself be bossed around. Since integrity, authenticity, autonomy, and self-respect are goods internal to a person, and since these goods are prima facie candidates for a meaningful life, the concept of a meaningful life cannot just be that of an existence that has "a connection with an external value."[21]

Connecting with Value Beyond the Animal Self

If a transcendence analysis is going to work, it must allow for the logical possibility of a person's life being meaningful for connecting to both internal and external goods. And such an analysis must carefully specify which internal goods are relevant, to be able to continue to differentiate meaning from happiness.

In light of these concerns, let us go beyond Nozick's remarks and propose the following transcendence analysis: the concept of meaning is the idea of connecting with intrinsic value beyond one's animal self. The animal self is constituted by those capacities that we share with (lower) animals, i.e., those not exercising reason. These include the fact of being alive, the instantiation of a healthy body, and the experience of pleasures. These internal conditions may well be intrinsically valuable, but they do not seem to be the sorts of intrinsic value with which one must connect to acquire significance. To say that the concept of meaning is the idea of relating positively to intrinsic value beyond one's animal self is to say that while merely staying alive or feeling pleasure logically cannot make one's life meaningful, connecting with internal goods involving the use of reason, and with all sorts of external goods, can do so.

By virtue of distinguishing between the animal self and the rational self, the present transcendence analysis allows conceptual space for internal goods to confer meaning on a life. Realizing one's higher nature and developing excellences, on this account, logically could confer meaning on a life by virtue of being a relevant way to transcend one's animal nature. Furthermore, the present analysis plausibly specifies which internal goods are conceptually relevant to meaning, namely, those beyond the animal self. This enables the present analysis to differentiate meaning from happiness, since the animal self is the locus of satisfaction. Finally, the present analysis articulates a reasonable understanding of what supernaturalism, subjectivism, and objectivism have in common. On this view, supernaturalists who prescribe communing with God or honoring one's soul, subjectivists who advocate striving to achieve whatever ideals one adopts upon reflection, and objectivists who recommend creating artworks or promoting justice, are all indicating ways to connect with value beyond the animal self. This is the most promising analysis proposed so far.

The biggest difficulty with the present analysis is that it has a hard time accounting for certain subjectivist views. For example, Richard Taylor defends a subjectivist theory that the present analysis must deem not to be a theory of meaning at all. Recall that according to Taylor, one's existence is more significant the more one gets whatever one passionately desires. It does not matter for Taylor how one's desires have been formed, in particular, whether one has reflected on them; he imagines that Sisyphus's life would be as meaningful as it could be if the gods

implanted in him a "keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing."[22] Assuming desire satisfaction is a good at all, it is an internal good that does not fundamentally involve the exercise of reason. Hence, the present analysis of the concept of meaning in terms of connecting with value beyond the animal self cannot count Taylor's view as a theory of meaning.

In reply, one may note that there are several subjectivist views for which the present analysis can account. For example, consider subjectivist theories that conceive of meaning in terms of the realization of ends that agents have adopted upon careful appraisal. These views include a cognitive element, differing from Taylor's purely conative view. For another example, consider the difference between a theory that holds meaning to consist of desire satisfaction and one that holds it to consist of an agent satisfying her desires. The former does not fundamentally involve any exercise of rational choice; a genie or god could fulfill a person's desires. However, the latter account includes a volitional element, the notion that someone must strive to acquire meaning, which would plausibly put it within the ambit of the present analysis. Perhaps it is not a great strike against the present analysis that it cannot accommodate Taylor's theory, at least if it can accommodate many other subjectivist views.

This reply would be stronger if Taylor's discussion of Sisyphus were not probably the most widely read discussion of the meaning of life among contemporary philosophers. His theory lies at the heart of recent debates about what makes a life significant. It is difficult to rest content with an analysis that implies that the many who consider Taylor's theory to be about meaning are conceptually confused. At any rate, it is worth seeing whether there is some other analysis that both has the advantages of the best version of the transcendence analysis and avoids the disadvantage of not accommodating Taylor's theory.

V. Esteem

We often associate questions of meaning with deathbed reflection. To access whether one's life is meaningful or not, a person often imagines she is at the end of her days on earth and considers how she would appraise her life from that perspective. The next analysis proposes that there is a logical connection between the question of what makes a life meaningful and a question about what kinds of attitudes would be appropriate to have toward it. On this view, there are two kinds of attitudes that are integral to the concept of a meaningful life, depending on whether one takes a first-person or third-person stance with regard to the life. Specifically, the concept of meaning might be this idea: those aspects of a life for which the person whose life it is may sensibly have great esteem and for which others may sensibly have great admiration. For the sake of economy, the following discussion will tend to focus on the first-person perspective and speak of meaning in terms of conditions meriting great esteem.

The terms "esteem" and "pride" are here used interchangeably to denote a certain perceptual-affective response to an object related to oneself. One has both a sense and a feeling of esteem. In taking pride in something, one both perceives that it is worthy and feels satisfaction about it. For example, if a person takes pride in having reared her children, then she judges her behavior to have been all things considered well done and feels pleased for having done it. It would be odd to say that a person has esteem for an action when she deems it on

the whole disvaluable or does not feel good for having done it. In short, esteem is a matter of high regard and high spirits about facets of one's life.

One must not confuse esteem with self-esteem. Self-esteem involves having not only a sense that oneself is worthy, but also a sense that one can do something worthy. Esteem differs in that it does not fundamentally involve self-confidence; one can take pride in having done something and still feel incapable of doing much else. One should also not reduce esteem to a mere sense of satisfaction. Esteem includes this, but also includes an element of judgment. A person may be pleased with himself for having finished washing the dishes, but he presumably will not have esteem for doing so, since he does not regard that action to be particularly choiceworthy.

The present analysis does not construe meaning in terms of when people in fact have substantial esteem about their lives. Instead of analyzing a meaningful life as one that results in great pride, it does so in terms of a life in which people would be justified in taking great pride. It conceives of meaning as those conditions of a life warranting the positive responses of great esteem and admiration, regardless of whether such reactions are forthcoming.

Analyzing the concept of meaning in terms of greatly estimable or admirable conditions avoids the major problems facing the purpose and transcendence analyses. Since something other than promoting value or achieving ends could in principle merit great esteem, the esteem analysis allows for deontological and essentialist conceptions of meaning. The esteem analysis also does a good job of differentiating meaning from other values; the idea of a life that warrants great esteem differs from the ideas of happiness and dutiful action. And insofar as it is logically possible for desire satisfaction to constitute the conditions meriting great esteem, the esteem analysis accommodates "cruder" subjectivist theories of meaning.

In fact, the esteem analysis provides a promising way to understand what the three major theories of life's meaning have in common. It construes theories of meaning as providing rival accounts of those aspects of a life in which a person could reasonably take great pride (or for which an outsider could reasonably have great admiration). From this perspective, supernaturalists are contending that if there were no purely spiritual realm, then there would be nothing about one's life in the physical world that could be worthy of substantial esteem. Fulfilling God's purpose, attaining the condition where one could merge with God, or honoring one's soul are plausibly viewed as candidates for great esteem. Subjectivists on this account are maintaining that substantially estimable conditions vary, depending on a person's (or her group's) stronger wants or higher-order ends. Finally, the present analysis construes objectivists as holding that certain features of our natural lives can warrant great pride, but not merely in virtue of the subject's pro-attitude toward them. Roughly, positive responses to the true, the good, and the beautiful are what an objectivist deems to merit great esteem.

Let us question the esteem analysis. One worry about analyzing meaning in terms of greatly estimable conditions is that such an analysis might not in fact be able to single out meaning as a distinct part of the best life. Meaning theorists tend to see meaning as only one aspect of the best life, with other aspects being happiness and morality. However, the best life is surely the one that most warrants great esteem. The esteem analysis therefore apparently fails to differentiate the concept of a meaningful life from that of the best life.

This objection is not fatal. The defender of the esteem analysis can plausibly deny that the notion of the best life is exhausted by the idea of the life most warranting substantial esteem. She can hold that the concept of the best life is analyzed better in terms of a different attitudinal response, namely, desire. The notion of the best life is arguably the idea of the life we have most reason to want. This analysis is prima facie attractive, and it grounds a competing account of the close link between the idea of the best life and that of the life most warranting great pride. There is arguably a synthetic connection between these ideas, such that the notion of the life most warranting great pride is at least part of the best life, i.e., at least part of the life we have most reason to want.

While the esteem analysis might well characterize only theories of meaning, it has a much more difficult time accommodating all of them. If the concept of what makes a life meaningful were the idea of those conditions of a life warranting great esteem or admiration, then it obviously would be logically contradictory to maintain that a condition is meaningful and yet does not warrant great esteem. But there are at least two sorts of cases where it does *not* seem logically contradictory to say that a condition is meaningful but does not warrant great esteem. One kind of counterexample involves cases in which meaning is thought to supervene on happiness (among other conditions). Consider the theory that enjoying worthwhile activities makes a life meaningful. Many subjectivists and objectivists believe that a necessary condition of meaning is not being bored. And think about the view that a person's life is meaningful insofar as she is justly rewarded in an afterlife for having done good deeds. To some it seems that life would make sense only if happiness were ultimately proportioned to virtue. Now, it seems logically consistent to suppose that life would be more meaningful for such conditions *and* to deny that there is anything about enjoyment or reward (as opposed to worthwhile activities and good deeds) in which to take great pride. If these two claims are logically consistent, then the esteem analysis is false; for the esteem analysis implies that it is logically inconsistent to say both that a condition is meaningful and that it does not warrant great esteem.

Another kind of example concerns cases in which living in a certain environment might be thought to confer meaning on an individual's life. Consider the theory that a person's life would be more meaningful if she lived among natural objects than if she lived among plastic replicas of them. Or think about the view that a person's life would be more meaningful for living among old, handworked crafts and architecture than for living among new, mass-produced works. A person could plausibly think that being part of an ecosystem or having a continuity with history confers meaning on a life *and* deny that there is anything worthy of substantial pride about such conditions, particularly since they do not (in these examples) concern a person's identity or self-expression. But the esteem analysis implies that one is conceptually confused to maintain that something could be meaningful and yet not be worthy of great pride.

In sum, the esteem analysis implies that it is a closed question whether a condition warrants great esteem, assuming that it is considered meaningful. The above examples are cases in which a person could intelligibly assert that something is meaningful and yet deny that it warrants great esteem. Therefore, the esteem analysis does not do a good job of explaining what

makes these cases theories of meaning. Since the esteem analysis is the most promising one considered and since it cannot account for all theories of meaning, we may at this point reasonably doubt that there is *any* analysis available that can provide a single common denominator among all the diverse theories of meaning.

VI. Conclusion

This essay began by noting Updike's complaint that the question of what makes a life meaningful is not well formulated. This essay has sought to sharpen the question by finding an analysis of the concept of meaning that underlies the major conceptions of meaning to be found in 20th century philosophical literature. The discussion has progressed dialectically, presenting an analysis, considering counterexamples to it, refining the analysis so that it avoids the counterexamples, considering new counterexamples, and so on. Three major analyses were explored by this means and none was found able to account for all and only extant theories that intuitively seem to be about meaning. A tentative but fair conclusion to draw is that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory to be about meaning as opposed to something else. If this is true, how can research into the meaning of life proceed?

Here is one plausible answer: the same way that research into dutiful action has been conducted. Analyses of the concept of morality have not captured essential conditions for something to be moral as opposed to something else. Consider, in brief, the major attempted analyses of dutiful action and how they fail to capture all and only extant moral theories. Some suggest that the concept of dutiful action is just the idea of the promotion of human well-being, but this excludes the divine command theory and Kantianism. Others maintain that the concept of morality is just the idea that others provide one a fundamental reason to act, but this omits egoism and instrumental-relativist views. Some construe the moral realm as merely the domain of impartial behavior, but this excludes fundamentally partialist theories (e.g., the views that one owes more to those one cares about or to those who are closest to oneself) and theories that include a self-regarding element (e.g., egoism and Kantianism). Yet a fourth way to understand morality is in terms of norms the violation of which warrants blame, but this does not capture egoism well at all. Although theorists have not been able to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for morality, their attempts to do so have been revealing and moral theory has progressed fine without such conditions. We have arguably learned that moral theories have family resemblances among them, and research has proceeded in light of these characteristics. That is, moral theories are views that are united by virtue of addressing, say, two or more of the following features: other-regarding basic reasons, impartial behavior, promotion of well-being, and norms the violation of which warrants condemnation.

A similar situation is probably true of meaning theory. Having failed to find essential conditions for meaning does not mean that the question of what makes a life meaningful is just as vague as when we started. In the course of searching for a sharp concept that underlies the conceptions of meaning in the literature, our understanding of what these conceptions are about has improved. We have arguably learned that theories of meaning have family resemblances among them. Meaning theories are united by virtue of systematically answering questions such as the following: how may a person bring purpose

to her life, where this is not just a matter of pursuing happiness or acting rightly? How should an individual connect with intrinsic value beyond his animal nature? How might one do something worthy of great admiration? Readers should see that these questions are neglected without justification, viz., that they are just as important and amenable of intelligent response as questions about morality and happiness. May this essay spur readers to agree that discussion about what makes a life meaningful is to be continued.[23]

University of Missouri – St. Louis

NOTES

1. Updike's quotation can be found in Hugh Moorhead, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1988), p. 200.

2. Although relatively little writing was done in the 1990s, a decent amount was done in the 1960s and 70s, much of which was anthologized in the 1980s. See Steven Sanders and David Cheney, eds., *The Meaning of Life: Questions, Answers, and Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980); E. D. Klemke, ed., *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Oswald Hanfling, ed., *Life and Meaning: A Reader* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1987).

3. Although merely listing synonyms does not constitute a revealing articulation of the question of what makes a life meaningful, analyzing the senses of synonyms could do so. For example, "purposeful" seems synonymous with "meaningful," and the possibility that the question of life's meaning is a question about a kind of purposefulness gets explored in section III below.

4. It might seem that talk of a "meaningful life" implies that the only potential bearer of meaning is a person's existence as a biographical whole. In fact, few meaning theorists intend anything so restrictive by such talk. Just as a life is more moral the more it is composed of moral deeds and dispositions, so a life is more meaningful, for most theorists, the more it is composed of meaningful acts and states. There are some, however, who do take life as a whole to be the only possible bearer of meaning. For instance, Thomas Nagel seems to do so in his discussion of meaninglessness from an objective standpoint. See his *What Does It All Mean?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), chap. 10.

5. Leo Tolstoy, "My Confession," trans. Leo Wiener, reprinted in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life,* chap. 1, and *Anna Karenin,* trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1954), esp. pp. 373–4, 400, 827–8; Soren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* reprinted in *A Kierkegaard Anthology,* ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), esp. p. 414; E. L. Fackenheim, "Judaism and the Meaning of Life," *Commentary* 39 (1965): 49–55; Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), esp. part 3.

6. E.g., Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 585–610; William Davis, "The Meaning of Life," *Metaphilosophy* 18 (1987): 288–305; Michael Levine, "What Does Death Have To Do with the Meaning of Life?" *Religious Studies* 23 (1987): 457–65; Thaddeus Metz, "Could God's Purpose Be the Source of Life's Meaning?" *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 293–313; Philip Quinn, "How Christianity Secures Life's Meanings," in *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions,* ed. Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), chap. 3.

7. William James, "What Makes a Life Significant?" in William James, *On Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1900), pp. 49–94; A. J. Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy," in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences,* ed. Maurice Natanson (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 475–9; Richard Taylor, *Good and Evil* (London: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970), chap. 18; Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chap. 1; Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 164–6.

8. See Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations,* pp. 594–600, 610–619, and *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), chap. 15; David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," revised edition in *Essays on Moral Realism,* ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), chap. 7; Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics,* 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chap. 12, and *How Are We to Live?* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995), chaps. 10–11; Susan Wolf, "Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207–25, and "Meaning and Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97 (1997): 299–315. In later work Richard Taylor rejects his earlier subjectivist view in favor of a species of objectivism. See "The Meaning of Human Existence," in *Values in Conflict: Life, Liberty, and the Rule of Law,* ed. Burton Leiser (New York: Macmillan, 1981), chap. 1.

9. See, e.g., John Wisdom, *Paradox and Discovery* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 38–42; and Paul Edwards, "Why?" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Volume 8, ed. Paul Edwards (London: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 296–302.

10. See, e.g., Paul Edwards, "The Meaning and Value of Life," in Klemke, *The Meaning of Life,* pp. 130–131.

11. Russell is quoted in Moorhead, *The Meaning of Life,* p 165.

12. Kai Nielsen, "Linguistic Philosophy and the 'The Meaning of Life,'" revised edition in *The Meaning of Life,* ed. Klemke, pp. 186, 193. For a similar claim, see Ayer, "The Claims of Philosophy," pp. 478–9.

13. Moore is quoted in Moorhead, *The Meaning of Life,* pp. 128–9. Cf. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 35.

14. Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 169–95; Shelly Kagan, "Rethinking Intrinsic Value," *The Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 277–97.

15. For a reading of Kant along these lines, see Thomas Pogge, "Kant on Ends and the Meaning of Life," in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls,* ed. Andrews Reath et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 361–87.

16. For instances of this sort of view, see R. W. Hepburn, "Questions About the Meaning of Life," *Religious Studies* 1 (1965): 125–40; Wolf, "Happiness and Morality," and "Meaning and Morality"; and John Kekes, "The Meaning of Life," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Life and Death,* ed. Peter French and Howard Wettstein, vol. 24 (2000): 17–34.

17. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations,* chap. 6, and *The Examined Life,* chap. 15.

18. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations,* p. 601.

19. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations,* p. 610. See also pp. 594, 611, 618.

20. For instances of such views, see David Swenson, *Kierkegaardian Philosophy in the Faith of a Scholar* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949); and P. Nagaraja Rao, "Hinduism," in *The*

Meaning of Life in Five Great Religions, ed. R. C. Chalmers and John Irving (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965), pp. 23–36.

21. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations,* p. 610.

22. Taylor, *Good and Evil,* p. 265.

23. I wrote much of this essay while I was a Visiting Researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. I thank Michael Pendlebury and other members of the Wits Philosophy Department for generously providing a supportive environment and for actively participating in a colloquium based on this paper. I would also like to express my appreciation to David Benatar and other members of the University of Cape Town Philosophy Department for inviting me to give a talk about this paper and for offering productive criticism. I thank Eric Wiland and Adila Hassim, too, for conversations that were helpful to me. In addition, I am grateful to David Copp, Garrett Cullity, Darrel Moellendorf, and an anonymous referee for *The American Philosophical Quarterly* for providing written comments that have led to substantial improvements in this essay. Finally, I must acknowledge the University of Missouri Research Board for the summer salary and research award that enabled me to write this paper.