Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol.5

Selected Papers from the Tohoku Conference

Edited by
Masahiro Morioka

Journal of Philosophy of Life

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Preface

This book is a collection of all the papers published in the special issue "Philosophy and Meaning in Life Vol. 5: Selected Papers from the Tohoku Conference," *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol.14, No.1, 2024, pp.1-53.

We held the Fifth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life online at Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan, on June 28–30, 2023. This conference was hosted by Tohoku University and supported by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. We accepted about 50 presentations from around the world. Professor Frances Kamm and Dr. Aribiah David Attoe gave keynote lectures.

After the conference, we called for papers for publication from the speakers, and we accepted three papers for the special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Life*. We would like to give special thanks to the anonymous referees who kindly reviewed the submitted manuscripts. The accepted papers deal with a variety of topics, such as perfectionism, pessimism, and psychopathology, and they are all discussed from the perspective of the philosophy of life's meaning.

In June 2023, we were still in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic in Japan, so Professor Tatsuya Murayama, the chair of the conference, and supporting staff members decided to hold the conference online. It is through their devotion that we were able to hold the three–day meeting successfully. We had many participants from around the world and we had lively discussions online. I would like to sincerely thank them for their contributions.

As the editor-in-chief, I hope that readers will enjoy the stimulating papers in this volume.

Masahiro Morioka
Professor, Waseda University
Editor-in-chief, *Journal of Philosophy of Life*
March 1, 2024.

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Perfectionism and Vulgarianism About a Meaningful Life

David Matheson*

Abstract

As a troubling evaluative error, perfectionism involves demanding of the merely good what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding. Iddo Landau has recently charged many philosophers of life with such perfectionism about a meaningful life. Here I argue that although Landau's charge is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, there is nevertheless an important lesson for them to learn from that charge: to avoid perfectionism about what they will regard as good but not meaningful lives, they must constantly be vigilant to appreciate the value of such lives. I go on to consider whether the required vigilance is a reason to abandon the superlative concept in favor of a nonsuperlative one. I argue that it is not, because a similar sort of vigilance, to avoid a contrasting but equally troubling error that I call "vulgarianism," would be required even upon such abandonment.

1.

In a familiar negative sense of the term, to be a perfectionist is to expect of plain value what should only be expected of superlative value—to demand of the merely good, in other words, what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding. Thus the perfectionist instructor awards satisfactory grades only to the most gifted and industrious students in the course, the perfectionist parent is constantly dismayed about the ways in which their relationship with their child falls short of especially admirable parent-child bonds, and the perfectionist consumer insists that the midrange varieties of a product posses all the characteristic qualities of its premier varieties.

Perfectionism in this sense is a troubling evaluative error because it seems always to amount to a wrong or to carry very unfortunate effects.[1] The

* Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1S 6B8. Email: david.matheson@carleton.ca

** I am grateful to audience members at the Fifth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life for their helpful feedback on this paper. Iddo Landau was among those audience members, and he was particularly generous and constructive in his comments. I also owe special thanks to Lorraine Yeung and Lucas Scripter for their insightful thoughts about an early version of this paper, and to reviewers from this journal for their very welcome corrections and suggestions.

[1] It is thus more closely related to the maladaptive trait that psychologists have linked to Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (Ferguson 2022) than to a political philosophy. Understood as the

perfectionist instructor wrongs the satisfactory but less gifted and industrious students in the course by failing to acknowledge the good they have done. The perfectionist parent's dismay obscures the happy aspects of their parent-child bond, typically to their child's and often to their own detriment. The perfectionist consumer wrongs producers and fellow consumers alike by dismissing those midrange varieties as mere junk.

2.

In recent work, Iddo Landau has charged many philosophers of life with a perfectionism of the sort just described—with a troubling evaluative error that involves demanding of the merely good what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding. Anyone who holds that a meaningful life must include "some perfection or excellence or some rare and difficult achievements" commits the perfectionist error, he tells us, and the number of contributors to the meaning of life literature who do so is surprisingly large.[2] By casting meaning in terms of the demanding ideals of his overhuman, Landau says, Nietzsche clearly committed the perfectionist error. Camus likewise seems to have committed the error when he tied absurdity to the absence of a complete, unifying knowledge that is beyond the reach of us mere mortals. Nozick's perfectionism, Landau continues, is manifest in his insistence that a meaningful life must make some sort of permanent difference to, or leave "traces" in, the world. The kind of creativity that Richard Taylor views as making for a meaningful life amounts to something very unique and uncommon; this too, Landau says, is a manifestation of perfectionism. Laurence James's argument that meaning entails achievements that are difficult both for the individual and for the average person quite obviously commits him to perfectionism. Indeed, Landau notes, some of the most prominent figures in previous eras of philosophy seem to have fallen victim to the perfectionist error. This includes both Plato and Spinoza, with their emphasis on the rare and difficult nature of what characterizes the truly meaningful.[3]

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maladaptive trait, perfectionism amounts to a tendency to strive for flawlessness in unrealistic ways. Understood as a political philosophy, perfectionism amounts to the view that politics should be aimed at the perfection or development of the properties that "constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity" (Hurka 1993, p. 3).

[2] Landau (2017), pp. 31–34.

[3] We may add that Aristotle hardly even needs to be mentioned in this context, given how obvious it is that he was committed to the idea that a meaningful life must include some excellence. The *aretai* around which he centered his entire approach to ethics were, after all, *excellences* of character and mind that

Landau's charge that they are committing the perfectionist error by virtue of maintaining that a meaningful life must include some excellence is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, however, for a reason I am about to explain. Note that when I talk about a concept of a meaningful life in this context, I'm talking about a basic way of understanding what it is that we are theorizing about when we give our various theories or conceptions of a meaningful life—an identification of the *explanandum* we seek to articulate and illuminate with our various *explanantia*. And when I talk about a superlative concept of a meaningful life, I'm talking about a concept of a meaningful life that entails some superlative value. Some concepts of a meaningful life are nonsuperlative because they entail no superlative value; that is, there are satisfactory definitions of these concepts that include no terms of superlative value. Among these nonsuperlative concepts I count that of a life devoted to the pursuit of one's passions[4] and that of a worthwhile life.[5] There are, by contrast, no satisfactory definitions of superlative concepts of a meaningful life that fail to include terms of superlative value. A satisfactory definition of the concept of a meaningful life as a life characterized by what is worthy of great admiration,[6] for example, will have to include terms of superlative value that correspond to "worthy of *great* admiration." A satisfactory definition of the Aristotelian concept of a meaningful life to which I am partial, namely, that of a life devoted to the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life,[7] will likewise have to include terms of superlative value corresponding to "*best* sort." And so on.

The reason that Landau's charge is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life is that the charge of perfectionism seems only to apply when superlative value is expected of what is clearly a nonsuperlative value. The charge of perfectionism against the instructor makes sense because the instructor is expecting superlative value of something that is clearly a nonsuperlative value, to wit, a *satisfactory performance* in the course. If the instructor were only expecting superlative value of a top performance in the course, the charge of perfectionism would make little sense. The charge of perfectionism against the parent is warranted because they are expecting

served to distinguish their possessors from *hoi polloi*.

4 E.g. Singer ([1992] 2010).

5 E.g. Wittgenstein ([1929] 1965).

6 See Kauppinen (2012) and Metz (2001).

7 Matheson (2022).

superlative value of a *good relationship* with their child, which is, on the face of things, a nonsuperlative value. That charge would hardly be warranted against a parent who expects superlative value of something like an outstanding relationship with their child, or the most impressive of parent-child bonds. Similarly, the consumer would be committing no perfectionist error by demanding superlative value of premier product varieties. The consumer only commits the error because they expect superlative value of something like a *midrange variety* of the product, which, again, is obviously a nonsuperlative value. For those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, Landau's perfectionist charge is likely to be seen as analogous to laying the charge of perfectionism against an instructor who awards the highest grades only to the most gifted and industrious of students in the course, or against a parent who merely acknowledges that their good relationship with their child still doesn't amount to the best, or against the consumer who complains that that product variety is not the top-of-line it is billed as being because it lacks a number of the outstanding features that characterize that premier range.

3.

Grant, then, that Landau's perfectionist charge is as it stands unlikely to persuade who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life. What I want to stress now is that there is nevertheless an important lesson that these philosophers can learn from that charge. The lesson is this: those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life must be vigilant about appreciating the value of what in their superlative view will be the many nonmeaningful varieties of a good life, for without this vigilance they *do* put themselves in danger of committing the perfectionist error—not about *a meaningful life*, but rather about *a good life* that falls outside of the scope of a meaningful life, in their view. One doesn't commit the perfectionist error simply by adhering to a superlative concept of a meaningful life. But one can commit the error if one adheres to such a concept and then is insufficiently appreciative of the goodness to be found in the many varieties of a good life that fall outside of this concept.

To fail to appreciate the value of good lives that are not meaningful under the superlative concept is to be in danger of treating such lives as of no value at all because they lack the superlative value that one takes to be characteristic of a meaningful life. But because such lives are clearly not to be understood in terms

of superlative value, one is ipso facto in danger of being a perfectionist about *them*, even if one is not in danger of being a perfectionist about a meaningful life according to one's superlative concept. By failing in this way to appreciate the value of what one regards as nonmeaningful varieties of a good life, in other words, one is in danger of expecting of lives of plain value what should only be expected of lives of outstanding value. Hence to avoid the danger of perfectionism, those who do adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life must be vigilant always to appreciate the value of what in their view will be nonmeaningful varieties of a good life.

To illustrate, suppose that we adhere to the Aristotelian concept of a meaningful life as a life devoted to the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life. It would be ridiculous to pretend that are no varieties of a good life, a worthwhile life, and so on, other than a meaningful life, so understood. All kinds of lives devoted to good-but-not-the-best sorts of pursuit a human being can adopt in life will fall along with a meaningful life under the canopy of a good life. This will plausibly include lives devoted to socially important but deeply monotonous forms of labor.[8] It will also plausibly include some lives devoted to nothing at all, such as the pleasant life of the morally respectable dilettante.

But if we are not careful, it would be all too easy for us to let our interest in a meaningful life, superlatively understood, cause us not to appreciate the value of all of these lives of plain value. In the same way that the perfectionist instructor fails to appreciate the value of their middling students' performances, we may fail to appreciate the value of what by our lights are nonmeaningful but good lives by failing to be sufficiently laudatory of or encouraging about those lives. Overly absorbed by the thought that those lives are not devoted to the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt, we may fail to praise them for all the goodness they nevertheless do exemplify; or we may fail sufficiently often to say kind words to encourage individuals living such lives to keep up the good work; in either case,

[8] It's worth noting that lives may appear to be devoted to socially important but deeply monotonous forms of labor when in fact they are devoted to something else. The government clerk, for example, whose life appears to be devoted to the performance of those repetitive tedious tasks that are required for government officials to do their more noticeable work may actually be living a life devoted to an important sort of creativity, viz., the sort that involves inventing new ways of challenging oneself, or keeping oneself interested, in the performance of such repetitive tasks. In their life, the clerk nobly uses the repetitive tasks they are assigned a means of realizing creativity. That this sort of life can be truly outstanding despite appearing otherwise to others seems precisely to be Camus's point in his famous closing line about Sisyphus with a noble attitude: "one must imagine [such a] Sisyphus happy" ([1942] 2013, p. 123). See also Taylor's comments about the importance of "the state of mind with which such labors are undertaken" (1970, pp. 265ff.).

we fail to appreciate the value of these good lives in such a way that we commit, or come perilously close to committing, the perfectionist error. In the same way that the perfectionist parent fails to appreciate the value of their good parent-child bond, we may fail to appreciate the value of the lives that we regard as good despite lacking the superlativeness we think is required for meaning, by too frequently emphasizing the fact that they are not meaningful by our lights: our evaluative remarks about these lives may be too dominated by comments to the effect that the lives are not the lives of the Gandhis, the Mother Teresas, the Einsteins, or the Ella Fitzgeralds of this world. And as the perfectionist consumer fails to appreciate the value of those midrange varieties of a product, we may fail to appreciate the value of what we regard as good but not meaningful lives by overinflating whatever criticisms we might make of such lives. “Oh, I wish my child were pursuing something *really* worthwhile in their lives” (with the implication that whatever they are pursuing in their lives is all but worthless) and “Their interests in life rise no higher than bread and circuses” (with the implication that having no higher interests makes their lives no better lived that not) may be grounded in justifiable criticisms of the extent to which the lives in question fall short of the best we humans are capable of, but they will typically come across as overly harsh judgments to the effect that the lives criticized are so trivial as to be bad rather than good lives.

For those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life, this lesson to be drawn from Landau’s perfectionist charge is important to learn because it seems all too easy for those strongly interested in some sort of superlative value to commit the perfectionist error about related plain values. Although I don’t think that Nietzsche committed the error about a meaningful life simply because he required certain excellences of such a life, he did seem prone to the error when it came to what on his superlative concept should be regarded as varieties of a good life that are not meaningful. Early in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, he has his protagonist contrast the life of the overhuman with that of the ultimate mere human (*der letzte Mensch*). The life of the ultimate mere human is clearly some sort of good life, characterized as it is by such values as longevity, health, pleasure, friendliness, wit, self-assurance, and knowledge. But because it does not display the sort of superlative value that characterizes the life of the overhuman, Nietzsche seems to view it in downright negative terms. The ultimate human, his Zarathustra

claims, is "the most contemptible" sort.[9]

One might also see perfectionism about certain nonsuperlative or plain values in Camus's famous remarks about the most important of philosophical questions. He opens his "Myth of Sisyphus" essay with the following arresting lines:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.[10]

That Camus was especially interested in the philosophical question he here describes—the question of how to understand and respond to judgments about the worthwhileness of life—is obvious from the long and exquisitely expressed train of thoughts that follow in the essay. Equally obvious is the fact that he takes this question to be of superlative value, at least philosophically speaking: this is why he describes it as *the one truly serious* philosophical problem and *the fundamental* question of philosophy. Moreover, you hardly have to strain your interpretation of this passage to see Camus's failure to appreciate the value of the other philosophical questions at which he gestures, viz., questions of metaphysics and epistemology and the philosophy of mind that have been pursued by many throughout the history of Western philosophy. We forgive Camus for being so disparaging of these other questions because he was so brilliantly insightful in his reflection on the question of life's worthwhileness. But this shouldn't cause us to overlook the fact that he is being very disparaging of these other questions: in his view they amount to little more than games in which the philosopher might without too much irresponsibility engage *if* they had already addressed the question of life's worthwhileness; the latter is in his view so much more valuable that those traditional questions that they come pretty close to having no real philosophical value at all. As Nietzsche's interest in the life of the overhuman seems to have caused him to commit the perfectionist error about other sorts of good life, so Camus's interest in the question of life's worthwhileness seems to have caused him to commit the perfectionist error about other sorts of good philosophical question.

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[9] Nietzsche ([1883] 2003), Prologue, Sect. 5, p. 46.
[10] Camus ([1942] 2013), p. 5.

Yet one more illustration of how those who are especially interested in superlative values are prone to the perfectionist error about related plain values can be drawn from a fascinating monologue that appears in Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin's Academy Award winning documentary, *Free Solo*. The film documents the preparations of American rock climber Alex Honnold to be the first to scale the nearly one-kilometer high "El Capitan" rock wall in Yosemite National Park without a rope. At one point, reflecting on the different fundamental attitudes that he and his girlfriend Sanni take towards life, Honnold comments:

> For Sanni the point of life is like happiness. To be with people that make you feel fulfilled and to have a good time. For me, it's all about performance. The thing is anybody can be happy and cozy. Nothing good happens in the world by being happy and cozy. You know, like nobody achieves anything great because they're happy and cozy.[11]

You cannot help but be impressed by the superlative value that drives Honnold. His interest that value, however, seems to go hand in hand with an unjustifiably dismissive attitude towards such plain values as comfort and a sense of fulfillment. So much so that he seems not even to recognize these things as really of any value at all: "Nothing good," as he puts it, "happens in the world by being happy and cozy."

4.

If those who are especially interested in superlative values are prone to perfectionism about related plain values, as I have suggested above, do those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life have good reason to abandon it in favor a nonsuperlative one? One might suppose that they do: after all, with their superlative concept they are required constantly to be vigilant about appreciating the value of what they regard as good but not meaningful lives, and if they were to abandon that concept they would not be required to do this, since they would eradicate the described danger of becoming perfectionists about such lives. To begin thinking of a meaningful life in fundamentally nonsuperlative

[11] Chai Vasarhelyi & Chin (2018), 1:06:20–1:06:45.

rather than superlative terms is no longer be in any special danger of becoming overly absorbed by the thought that nonsuperlative good lives fall short of a meaningful life, and thus no longer to be in any special danger of overlooking the goodness of such lives. To begin thinking of a meaningful life in fundamentally nonsuperlative rather than superlative terms is no longer to be prone to being too regularly critical or overly harsh in the assessment of such nonsuperlative lives. And so on.

But this assumes that those who would abandon their superlative concept of a meaningful life in favor of a nonsuperlative one would not be required to be so constantly vigilant about avoiding some other, equally troubling evaluative error. For if they would still be required to be so vigilant, only now in order to avoid some troubling error other than perfectionism, then there would be no real advantage to abandoning their superlative concept. And what I now want to suggest is that those who would abandon their superlative concept in favor of a nonsuperlative one would still be required to be constantly vigilant in this way.

For lack of a better term, I will call the contrasting evaluative error I have in mind "vulgarianism." Whereas the perfectionist demands of the merely good what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding, the vulgarian only demands of the outstanding what ought to be demanded of the merely good. The vulgarian doesn't just require of superlative value what is required of plain value; they further insist in practice that nothing more is required of superlative value—that the merely good, in effect, suffices for the outstanding. Thus, whereas the perfectionist instructor awards satisfactory grades only to the most gifted and industrious of their students, the vulgarian instructor awards top grades to all of their satisfactory students, even to those whose performance puts them barely beyond the passing threshold. Whereas the perfectionist parent is constantly dismayed about the ways in which their relationship with their child falls short of particularly admirable parent-child bonds, the vulgarian parent willfully ignores potential areas for improvement in their relationship with their child, even significant ones, due to the fact that they recognize no better parent-child bond than it. And whereas the perfectionist consumer insists that those midrange product varieties ought to have all the qualities of the premier ones, the vulgarian consumer never says a word about any of the ways in which those midrange varieties fail to live up to their premier counterparts, praising both in equally laudatory terms.

The reason that vulgarianism in this sense is as troubling an evaluative error as perfectionism is that it seems always to amount to an equally troubling wrong

or to carry equally troubling effects. Most certainly, the perfectionist instructor wrongs those less gifted and industrious students by failing to acknowledge the good they have done. But the vulgarian instructor equally wrongs the most gifted and industrious students by failing to acknowledge extra good they have so impressively done. No doubt it is typically to their child's and often to their own detriment that the perfectionist parent's dismay obscures the happy aspects of their parent-child bond. There is also little doubt, however, that is typically as much to their child's and often to their own detriment that the vulgarian parent is oblivious to the areas of potential improvement in their relationship, some of which may be very significant. And while the perfectionist consumer clearly wrongs producers and fellow consumers alike with their dismissals of those midrange product varieties, the vulgarian consumer just as clearly wrongs others with a failure to acknowledge the superior quality of the premier varieties: they wrong producers of the premier varieties, for example, by disrespecting the extra effort they have put into the production of those varieties, and they wrong fellow consumers by diminishing the likelihood of their being motivated enough ever to experience the extra goodness of the premier varieties.

The charge that to refuse to require some excellence of a meaningful life Is ipso facto to commit the vulgarian error is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, just as Landau's charge that to require some excellence of a meaningful life is ipso facto to commit the perfectionist error is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place. Just as the perfectionist charge only applies when superlative value is expected of a nonsuperlative value, so the vulgarian charge only applies when nothing but nonsuperlative value is expected of a superlative value. But for those who do adhere to a fundamentally nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life, such a life is not of course a superlative value. Hence in these individuals' perspective, there's little sense to be made of any suggestion about committing the vulgarian error about a meaningful life. In their view, a meaningful life is just not the sort of thing you can legitimately be charged with committing the vulgarian error about.

Nevertheless, it seems that those who adhere to a nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life will have to be especially vigilant to avoid vulgarianism about superior varieties of a meaningful life.

To illustrate this, suppose now that we adhere to a nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life that identifies it simply with a worthwhile life. It would be as

ridiculous to pretend that are in fact no varieties of a worthwhile life that are better than others as it would be to pretend that there are no varieties of a good life other than the ones devoted to the best sort of pursuit human beings can adopt. My life, devoted as it is to intellectual pursuits, is a worthwhile life. So too is that justly more famous fellow academic's life, devoted as it is to similar intellectual pursuits. I am not foolish enough to suggest that my intellectual life is evaluatively equal to theirs: due to their abilities, industriousness, and resulting accomplishments, their intellectual life is plainly superior to mine. In one sense, we are intellectual peers, but some peers in this sense are obviously higher in the relevant evaluative rank, and it is no false humility for me to recognize that my fellow academic is higher than me. Similarly, I can readily deem my worthwhile intellectual life lower on the all-things-considered evaluative scale than various nonintellectual worthwhile lives. I genuinely (and, of course, in firm opposition to *that* part of Aristotle's thought) take it to be an open question whether my car mechanic's obviously worthwhile life is, all things considered, superior to my particular intellectual life. In the same way that Kant talked about his spirit bowing before the ordinary person of superior moral virtue,[12] I can't help but mentally bow to the impressive skill, magnanimity, and genuine good will of my mechanic every time I talk to him. So I might well recognize, upon finding out more about it, that my mechanic's worthwhile life of skilled labor is also superior to my worthwhile intellectual life.

Given the prevalence of such superior meaningful lives on the nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life, if those who adhere to such a concept are not especially careful, it will be all too easy for them to let their interest in a meaningful life, nonsuperlatively understood, cause them to fail to appreciate the value of such superior meaningful lives. As the vulgarian instructor fails to acknowledge the extra good that their most gifted and industrious students have accomplished, those with the nonsuperlative, worthwhileness concept of a meaningful life may all too easily fail to appreciate the extra value of superior worthwhile lives by failing to be sufficiently laudatory of them.[13] As the vulgarian parent fails to appreciate the excellences of superior parent-child bonds,

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[12] Kant ([1788] 2015). p. 64.

[13] Perhaps the thought would be that it will be too discouraging for those whose worthwhile lives nevertheless fall short of those superior ones. If so, it seems to me a thought that places too little faith in our fellow human beings. I, at any rate, am not discouraged by my recognition of the superiority of that fellow academic's or even my mechanic's life; on the contrary, I am inspired by their examples to make my already worthwhile life even better.

those with a nonsuperlative concept may fail to appreciate the excellences of various superior worthwhile lives by too frequently emphasizing the fact that they are worthwhile lives, as if that's the only thing that needs to be truly said about such lives once it is truly said. And as the vulgarian consumer fails to acknowledge the superior quality of the premier product varieties, those with a nonsuperlative concept like the worthwhileness one may fail to appreciate the value of superior worthwhile lives by overinflating the positive things they say about the other worthwhile lives. Thus, an attempt might be made to quell the point about the inferiority of my worthwhile life by an over-the-top emphasis of such true points as "Oh, but you've published in this or that impressive journal" or "Yes, but they've never experienced the joys of the intellectual life that you have."

5.

I would be the last to discourage discussion of superlative and nonsuperlative concepts of a meaningful life. If what I have said above is correct, however, the question of which sort of concept of a meaningful life we should adhere to isn't going to be decided on perfectionist grounds. I have argued that although Landau's perfectionist charge is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life, there is nevertheless an important lesson for them to learn from that charge: to avoid perfectionism about what they will regard as good but not meaningful lives, they must constantly be vigilant to appreciate the value of those lives. I have also argued that the vigilance required is no reason by itself to abandon the superlative concept in favor of a nonsuperlative one, for a similar sort of vigilance, to avoid the contrasting but equally troubling error of vulgarianism, would be required of them even upon such abandonment.

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What's the Point If We're All Going to Die?
Pessimism, Moderation, and the Reality of the Past

Matthew Pianalto*

Abstract

Pessimists sometimes declare that death makes everything we do pointless or meaningless. In this essay, I consider the motivations for this worry about our collective mortality. I then examine some common responses to this worry that emphasize moderating our standards or changing our goals. Given some limitations of the "moderating our standards" response, I suggest that Viktor Frankl's view about the permanence of the past offers a different and perhaps better way of responding to the worry that death renders our lives meaningless. After outlining his view, its implications, and the view of time it assumes, I consider and respond to some possible objections to Frankl's view. If Frankl is right, death cannot make life meaningless or pointless because meaning is attained within life, and when we die our completed lives endure as part of the past.

"Having been is also a kind of being, and perhaps the surest kind."
– Viktor E. Frankl[1]

Pessimists sometimes declare that death—both personal death and our collective mortality as a species—makes everything we do pointless or meaningless. This seems to many others like an overreaction. However, given that much of what we care about presupposes the continuation of human life, maybe the pessimists have a point. In this essay, I consider the motivations for this worry about our collective mortality from the perspective of, broadly speaking, secular or naturalist worldviews. I then examine some common responses to this worry that emphasize moderating our standards or changing our goals in ways that insulate them from death. Given some limitations of the "moderating our standards" response, I suggest that Viktor Frankl's view about the permanence of the past offers a different and perhaps better way of responding to the worry that death renders our lives meaningless. After outlining his view, its implications, and

* Professor of Philosophy, Department of History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies, Eastern Kentucky University, Keith Hall 323, 521 Lancaster Avenue, Richmond, KY 40475 USA. Email: Matthew.Pianalto@eku.edu

[1] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006): 82.

the view of time it assumes, I anticipate and respond to some possible objections to Frankl's view. If Frankl is right, death cannot make life meaningless or pointless because meaning is attained within life, and when we die our completed lives endure as part of the past.

"What's the Point of Doing Anything If We're All Going to Die?"

This question may strike some readers as juvenile, and indeed, it was posed to me by a young person—my daughter when she was twelve years old. However, she is far from the first to ask, and she is in notable company. Reflecting on our collective mortality drove Leo Tolstoy, in middle age, to the brink of suicide. His faith in the point of living was restored by a religious conversion.[2] Others, like Bertrand Russell and Albert Camus, vigorously reject religious consolations, but seek to put on a brave face while confronting the ultimate impermanence of our lives, our species, and our planet.[3] They seek to affirm the dignity of human life without illusions about our eventual annihilation. But if we are all going to die, what is the point of the brave face?

Of course, when the question is posed in this way, it is more of a rhetorical exclamation than an open question: if we're all going to die, then there's no point in doing anything! The idea may quickly devolve into wholesale value skepticism that ignores all the mundane and everyday ways in which many actions have obvious, if limited, points. As Nagel has argued, the point of many things we do is rooted in the present or near future, and if it is true that nothing we do now will matter in millions of years, it is not clear why that should matter to us now.[4]

Nevertheless, there is *something* bothersome in the question as to what our collective mortality means for the meaningfulness of our own lives. Samuel Scheffler amplifies this question by imagining scenarios in which the extinction of human life or the entire planet are known and on the near horizon: the planet will be destroyed thirty days after the natural end of one's own (long) life (*the Doomsday scenario*), or in a different twist, mass infertility ensures that our children's generation will be the final generation of human beings (*the Infertility scenario*).[5] These scenarios bring our collective mortality near enough to our

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[2] Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. Aylmer Maude (Dover, 2005/1882).

[3] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1993/1942); Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957): 104-116.

[4] Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[5] Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

lives that it is likely to interfere with and frustrate many of our current projects, so it is no wonder that at least some of the things we care about would seem to become pointless if we learned that the Doomsday or Infertility scenario were real. Scheffler posits that many people would feel that their lives had become pointless.

Several commentators have argued that *many* things would continue to have a point in these scenarios because their significance does not depend on the existence of future humans (or future life in general): caring for each other in our final days or years, making art for one another to appreciate, and dying with dignity—working toward a "good end" to the story of *homo sapiens*.[6] These responses concede that what would remain meaningful would *change* since many future-oriented projects would no longer make sense. However, if some things continue to have a point even in the Doomsday and Infertility scenarios, then the existential dread expressed by my daughter and Tolstoy seems to have been answered, since their concerns don't even presuppose that our extinction is so near at hand.

The Endurance Dependence Thesis

One might insist, nevertheless, that there is some "ultimate meaning," or enduring significance, that our lives cannot possess because the extinction of life and the planet will erase *everything*—all will be as naught.[7] Sometimes concerns about ultimate meaning are about the existence or absence of a divine purpose to our lives or the whole universe. I will not directly consider the issue of having or lacking a divine purpose. However, one feature of worldviews that characterize our lives and universe as part of some greater divine reality is that there is something that *endures* even if we do not. On some such views the divine reality is such that *we* endure after death in some form—either in an afterlife, a memory in the mind of God, or so forth.

Such lines of thought involve not only the existence of a divine reality but also the thesis that meaning—or ultimate meaning—depends on something's *enduring*. We can then notice that the pessimistic reaction to personal and collective mortality appears to depend on the following form of argument:

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[6] For responses that develop this kind of response, see especially Susan Wolf's commentary in Scheffler (2016) and Jens Johansson, "The Importance of a Good Ending: Some Reflections on Samuel Scheffler's 'Death and the Afterlife'," *The Journal of Ethics* 19, no. 2 (2015): 185-195.

[7] Rivka Weinberg, "Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad," *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 1, no. 1, article 4 (2021); doi: 10.35995/jci01010004. Cf. David Benatar, *The Human Predicament* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

1. Something has meaning only if it endures.
2. Human life does not endure; we're *all* going to die.
3. Therefore, human life does not have meaning.

Call premise 1 the *Endurance Dependence Thesis (EDT)*, stated in basic form. More refined versions of EDT might replace "meaning" with "ultimate meaning" or specify the duration required for different levels or degrees of meaningfulness, as well as what exactly it means to "endure." Does enduring require personal survival, or is leaving "traces" sufficient?[8] Whichever way one proceeds, the main feature of the EDT is that enduring is a necessary condition for meaning. One way to interpret this is that something (or someone) can have meaning for *as long as* it endures, but once it ceases to exist, so does its meaningfulness. This seems to capture the thought that death negates the meaningfulness of our lives.

The now common philosophical shift to examining the relationships, activities, and projects that confer meaning *in* life may not really address the oppressive dread that some feel when they contemplate our collective mortality—whether it is to be in thirty days or three billion years. One might suggest that if human finitude distresses someone to the point of thwarting their motivation to live, then that is a matter for therapy rather than philosophy: Tolstoy was depressed, and that *caused* his pessimism and despair.[9] If he were not depressed, he would see (or feel) that the meaning obtainable *in* life is worthwhile and not thwarted by personal or collective mortality. The EDT allows for some degrees of meaning. However, this line of thought runs the risk of psychologizing what may seem like a philosophical problem. If Tolstoy's insights about the meaning-annihilating force of death are correct, then depression and despair might seem like a reasonable response. But we would need to formulate a stronger version of the EDT in order to capture fully Tolstoy's position.

The pessimist might argue that the secular literature on meaning in life is more or less engaged in a wholesale changing of the subject, a deflection, that tells us not to worry (at least not too much) about our collective mortality because there

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[8] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, 1981), 582ff.

[9] See Joseph Hayes, Cindy L.P. Ward, and Ian McGregor, "Why Bother? Death, Failure, and Fatalistic Withdrawal from Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 110, no. 1 (2016): 96-115. Tolstoy later regards his period of despair as a product of deep dissatisfaction with his life and social position: he repeatedly refers to himself and other members of his elite social class as "parasites" on the working class.

is good stuff *in* life. *Terror management theory*, a framework that psychologists have employed to study and understand how "mortality salience" affects human cognition and motivation might describe the shift to meaning in life as one of many terror management strategies. However, this body of research also reveals that death anxiety can lead us to behave in less than rational ways in seeking to defend and affirm the meaningfulness of our lives.[10] Paradoxically for the philosopher of death, mortality salience may impair analytical reasoning.[11] Pessimists might suggest that the "meaning in life" optimists are simply ignoring the ultimate futility of all human projects, a coping strategy well-explained by terror management theory.

Some who despair over our collective mortality seem to worry that this is what makes our predicament so dreadful: everything that is good in life will be destroyed, and there is no otherworldly consolation or compensation for this on a secular worldview.[12]

However, there are at least three different ways one might respond to this pessimistic line of thought. The first is to question the conceptual coherence of this notion of "ultimate meaning" on the grounds that "meaning" is not a feature or value that can be ultimate (or absolute), or that there is not some genuinely different category of meaning here. "Ultimate" might just be a fancy word (a term of art) for the highest degree of meaning attainable *within* the worldview in which one is developing a theory of meaningfulness. On a naturalist view, one might stipulate that attaining the most meaning in life possible just *is* to attain ultimate meaning. However, if we contrast that with what seems like a higher degree of (or longer enduring) meaning available on a supernaturalist worldview, then one might conclude that some kind of meaning is still missing in principle: the ultimate meaning that is *attainable* on the naturalist view is less than the ultimate meaning that is *conceivable* (on other views). In response, the naturalist might question whether such fanciful possibilities (by naturalism's standards) reflect *genuine* deficiencies in meaning. I will not pursue this approach further here, though it overlaps somewhat with the second response to EDT.

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[10] For an overview of terror management theory, see Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

[11] Bastien Trémolière, Wim De Neys, and Jean-François Bonnefon, "The Grim Reasoner: Analytical Reasoning Under Mortality Salience," *Thinking & Reasoning* 20, no. 3 (2014): 333-351.

[12] Joshua Seachris also suggests this point—that there may be something inherently unsatisfactory about the "ending" of the naturalistic "narrative" of life. See Seachris, "Death, Futility, and the Proleptic Power of Narrative Ending," *Religious Studies* 47 (2011): 141-163.

A second response involves denying the EDT on the grounds that it imposes an unreasonable condition on meaningfulness. Against the EDT, one might claim that present meaningfulness is sufficient for life to be meaningful: our lives *are* meaningful now (if they meet certain conditions) and that is enough! In broad terms, this approach involves arguing that the pessimist's standards for real or ultimate meaning are too high. If we require features like immortality, being remembered forever, or leaving indefinitely existing traces as a necessary condition for life to be (ultimately) meaningful, then the standard itself guarantees failure. But the problem is not with life but with the standard. We should adopt more moderate standards, or at least not feel bad that our lives cannot measure up to an impossible standard. I will consider some representative examples of this sort of response in the next section.

A third response accepts EDT but challenges interpretations of what it means to "endure" that are exclusively forward-looking. We often think about things enduring into the future (persisting as natural objects or organisms), but perhaps we should also consider the way in which things may endure as determinate parts of the past. This approach is hinted at in the epigraph above from Viktor Frankl: "having been is also a kind of being, and perhaps the surest kind." A meaningful thing obtained or achieved becomes a fact about reality, and facts are immaterial and thus can endure the utter destruction of physical reality. Of course, in keeping with the angsty remark of Woody Allen that he wants to live on in his apartment and not merely in the hearts of his countrymen, some may find the idea of "living on" as a set of determinate facts a rather hollow way of rescuing our lives from oblivion. Nevertheless, Frankl's outlook on this issue has not, to my knowledge, received much if any attention in the philosophical literature on death and meaning in life. Given the limitations of the second approach, I think it is worth considering the merits of Frankl's outlook, which I will do at some length after a brief examination of the merits of moderating our standards.

Responding to EDT, Part 1: Moderating Our Standards

The schematic argument above which introduced EDT is somewhat ambiguous. On one (weak) reading, it suggests that death *ends* the meaningfulness of a life; there's no possibility of adding meaning to your life once you're dead. However, pessimists like Tolstoy in his period of crisis have in mind a stronger point: that death *negates* any meaning attained in life, cancels it out. Death is not simply the end of a life; it *erases* that life.

At the level of personal mortality, we can notice that this stronger claim simply isn't true. The dead "live on" in various ways: in the memories of others, in the traces they leave behind, and sometimes they (or, their corpses) continue to "live"—as in the practices of the Torajan people—with their family members.[13] Of course, many of these forms of "symbolic immortality" depend on what Scheffler calls the "afterlife"—the continuation of the human communities in which we (at least some of us) continue to have some influence after we die. If the meaningfulness of our individual lives depends on the continuation of the community, then collective mortality dooms us all eventually. But does this mean that the meaningfulness of the lives led by all the members of all human communities has *ended* (such that no further meaning can be added to what has transpired), or is the meaningfulness of it all *negated*, erased, such that it was *all* for naught, all futile?

Brooke Alan Trisel argues that the worry that death renders life futile reflects an "unrealistic" standard for meaningfulness. He points out that while some of our goals may depend upon the continued existence of humans after our own death (such as writing books for posterity, leaving a legacy for our family or culture), many of our goals and efforts do not depend on the future in this way: "people do accomplish many of their goals: they graduate college, they get married, they pursue various careers, they write books, they travel, and so on."[14] For Trisel, living meaningfully is a matter of achieving goals. Thus, as long as our goals are realistic, we can avoid futility. If one wants to be remembered for an eternity, one's desire is almost certain to be frustrated (barring a supernatural realm of remembrance), but this is, according to Trisel, an unrealistic goal. This seems perfectly sensible. If one's goal is not to die, and one is a naturalist, then the situation looks bad. The most meaningful thing to do here might be to revise one's aims, to strive for things that are obtainable within life, and seek to align one's desires with one's metaphysical outlook.[15]

Kieran Setiya urges us to pay attention to the *atelic* aspects of activities that are often goal-oriented—to see the meaningfulness of engaging, for example, in an intellectual or artistic *process*, and not to locate all of the meaning in the final

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[13] Caitlyn Doughty, *From Here to Eternity* (Norton, 2017).

[14] Brooke Alan Trisel, "Human Extinction and the Value of Our Efforts," *The Philosophical Forum* 35, no. 3 (2004): 376.

[15] For other recommendations of moderated standards, see the end of Albert Camus' *The Rebel* (Vintage, 1991) and Odo Marquard, "On the Dietetics of the Expectation of Meaning," *In Defense of the Accidental*, translated by Robert M. Wallace (Oxford University Press, 1991): 29-49.

product.[16] He also notes that some things which appear to be important sources of meaning, such as spending time with loved ones (i.e. relationships), are atelic in that we achieve the goal simply by engaging in the activity. The end is internal to the activity or project. Obviously, death means we can no longer engage in atelic activities, but if the meaning is in doing them, then death, in a sense, comes too late to destroy the meaning. One might propose that *leading a life* is itself to be understood in this atelic sense, thereby removing some of the sting of the fact that, in one sense of the term, the "end" of every life is death. Such a view flatly rejects the EDT: meaningfulness is not a matter of how long one endures, but of how one lives for as long as one is alive.

Finally, Susan Wolf offers the most pointed, no-nonsense reply to the ill feeling that pessimists express when contemplating our cosmic insignificance, which is in part a function of our individual and collective impermanence. Wolf acknowledges, "The pessimists are right about the futility of trying to make ourselves important" in this cosmic sense.[17] Her advice: "Get Over It." Perhaps this is a pithy way of summarizing Trisel's point and asserting that from a naturalistic perspective, the only meaning we can realistically hope to attain is meaning *in* life.

However, if Wolf's rejoinder encapsulates Trisel's recommendation that we adopt realistic (or humbler) standards, then it may seem we have made no progress against the pessimist. The pessimist may very well accept—as Benatar does—that "terrestrial" meaning in life is the only meaning we can attain but insist, as Rivka Weinberg does, that this is an objectively *sad* fact about our meager little lives.[18] Nevertheless, their concession that there is *some* meaning obtainable in life constitutes progress over Tolstoy's despair that death renders *all* of our efforts futile. It is not clear just *how* sad Weinberg takes our mortality (or cosmic insignificance, etc.) to be.[19] However, even if it is an objectively sad fact that our lives lack some kinds or degrees of meaning, that does not entail the stronger pessimistic claim that death negates whatever meaningfulness we can attain in life.

In a response to Scheffler's Doomsday scenario, Wolf re-visits the feeling of pointlessness and disappointment in the face of our collective mortality and

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[16] Kieran Setiya, *Midlife* (Princeton University Press, 2017): 133ff.
[17] Susan Wolf, "The Meanings of Lives," in *The Variety of Value* (Oxford University Press, 2014): 104.
[18] See Note 7.
[19] Cf. Nelson Cowan, "Life is Pointless—Good Point…And How Do You Feel About That?" *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2, no. 1, article 13; doi: 10.35995/jci02010013.

speculates that questions like, "Why should I do my homework since the universe will ultimately disappear?" may be "unanswerable."[20] If what matters is what is permanent or will endure, then nothing matters. Her "get over it" response, as well as Trisel and Setiya's suggestions, urge us to get over the desire for permanence. Given our human situation, this seems like reasonable therapeutic advice, but pessimists may continue to insist that this is simply a *coping mechanism* for those who cannot stomach the depressing truth that our lives are *really, ultimately* meaningless, given a standard of meaning that we can specify but never attain. Providing a philosophical argument against this pessimistic line of thought might be unanswerable, as Wolf surmises; however, it may be possible, as I noted earlier, to demonstrate that the pessimist's standard of meaning is incoherent. Nevertheless, instead of pursuing that approach, I suggest we consider a different response to the pessimist's argument that shifts away from the sensible (but possibly question-begging) advice that we should adopt realistic standards and goals.

Responding to EDT, Part 2: Becoming Part of the Past

So far, I have focused on responses to EDT that *reject* it in order to overturn the pessimist's argument that death renders human life meaningless. However, another way to undermine the argument is to grant EDT but deny the second premise that human life does not endure. This route is obviously open to those who defend the existence of an afterlife in which we are in some way eternally preserved. A naturalist could perhaps make some similar suggestion that we "live on" in the various effects that our lives send rippling into the future or in the elements that once were part of our own bodies, though such impersonal "survival" does not seem to have interested Tolstoy and would not even count as enduring or survival on many views. Furthermore, such views seem vulnerable to cosmic concerns about entropy and the heat death of the universe. We can only endure for as long as *everything* endures.

However, this talk of enduring is nearly always future-oriented: to endure and to live "on" is to continue into the future, so to speak. Viktor Frankl's remark, presented at the beginning of this essay, challenges this future-biased way of thinking about what it means to endure: "Having been is also a form of being, and perhaps the surest kind." According to Frankl, the past endures simply in virtue

[20] The example comes from young character Alvy Singer in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall*. Wolf, "The Significance of Doomsday," in Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*, 126.

of being past and thereby determinate. That is, once something is done, it remains eternally true that it has been done: it becomes a real and permanent part of the past. This outlook—if it is coherent—offers a way of responding to the pessimist by granting EDT while rejecting the claim that human life does not endure.

1. *Frankl on the Reality of the Past*

Frankl expresses the idea that the past is real and endures in several of his writings, including the 1984 Postscript to *Man's Search for Meaning*:

> For as soon as we have used an opportunity and have actualized a potential meaning, we have done so once and for all. We have rescued it into the past wherein it has been safely delivered and deposited. In the past, nothing is irretrievably lost, but rather, on the contrary, everything is irrevocably stored and treasured. To be sure, people tend to see only the stubble fields of transitoriness but overlook and forget the full granaries of the past into which they have brought the harvest of their lives: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last but not least, the sufferings they have gone through with courage and dignity.[21]

Some may worry that Frankl's figurative language (the "granaries of the past") is charming but metaphysically suspect. However, the basic position can be stated without the flowery language: when we act, we bring into existence states of affairs that then become part of the determinate and real past. There they endure forever.

As in the views discussed in the previous section, Frankl stresses that meaning can be achieved or secured within life. He then adds the idea that such meaning is indeed *secure* in the past. If we have lived meaningfully—"with courage and dignity" or however else we see fit characterize meaning *in* life—then it will always be true that we did so. What is true of the past cannot be destroyed—by death or anything else.

In a 1966 essay, "Time and Responsibility," Frankl extends this line of thought to the whole person:

> What happens, finally, when all the sand has run through the neck of the

[21] Op cit., 150.

> hourglass and the upper part has become empty? When time has run out on us and our own existence has run to its final point—death?
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> In death everything becomes inflexible; nothing can be changed any more. The person has nothing left, has no more influence over his body and his psyche. He has completely lost his psychophysical ego, What remains is the self, the spiritual self. Man no longer has an ego, he 'has' nothing left, he only 'is'—his self.[22]

In other words, death brings about the *completion* of a person's life in the sense that it is the point at which the meaning of that life is fixed. At death, we "become" fully the sum of what we have been in our life—for better or worse! Frankl suggests that his outlook implies two "paradoxes." The first is:

> that man's own past is his true future. The dying man has no future, only a past. But the dead 'is' his past. He has no life, he is his life. That it is his past life does not matter; we know that the past is the safest form of existence—it cannot be taken away.[23]

Death is the moment at which we shift from *having a life* in which we are able to realize various possibilities, thereby making real the ones we act upon, to *being* the life that we have led. We only conclude this process of becoming at the moment of death. This point expresses the second "paradox":

> man does not become reality at his birth but at his death, for his self is not something that 'is' but something that is becoming—and has been completed only at the moment of his death.[24]

The paradoxical notion is that we do not become fully "real" until we have died, although in a quite ordinary sense, we no longer exist (are no longer alive) when we are dead: how can I be "real" or "exist" if I am dead? Of course, these seeming paradoxes, as well as Frankl's conception of becoming and the past, may trade on ambiguity or equivocation with respect to notions like "real" and "exist." Clearly,

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[22] Viktor Frankl, "Time and Responsibility" in *The Feeling of Meaninglessness*, edited by Alexander Batthyány (Marquette University Press, 2010): 174-5.

[23] Ibid., 175.

[24] Ibid., 175.

the sense in which we become "real" at the moment of death is not to be confused with being alive in the biological sense. His remark that "man's own past is his true future" suggests that our completed lives continue to exist as part of reality—the completed past—and exist as such indefinitely into the future. This, as it seems to me, is simply another way of saying that the past is *eternally* real. Death, rather than being the great destroyer of meaning, is the moment at which whatever meaning our lives possessed in life *becomes* a determinate part of this eternal reality.

Frankl anticipates one sort of objection to this outlook, which is that the past is only real, and that meaning only endures, if someone continues to remember it. He writes:

> it is irrelevant whether anyone remembers or not; just as it is irrelevant whether we look at something or think about something, that it still exists and is with us. For it exists regardless of whether we look at it or think about it…the totality of our life, which we have lived to completion and death, remains outside the grave, and outside the grave it remains. And it remains not although, but because it has slipped into the past and has been preserved there. Even what we have forgotten, what has escaped from our consciousness, remains preserved in the past; it cannot be eliminated, it 'is' and remains part of the world.[25]

Although some may find this conception of the past mysterious, it seems no less mysterious than the idea that there are facts about the past that we do not know and perhaps cannot know because anything that we could recognize as evidence for these facts is no longer available. Nevertheless, whatever happened really did happen. That some future people, or some alien race, or the black hole into which our solar system will collapse may not be able to *recognize* the facts that characterize the meaningfulness of our lives does not *remove* or *erase* that meaning if those facts and the enduring past that grounds them are mind-independent features of reality. It may be important for us to remember the past for our own sakes, but the past, on Frankl's view, does not need us to remember or verify it in order for it to be real.

[25] Ibid., 173.

2. *Existential Implications*

As an existential psychiatrist, Frankl aims to provide a framework that reveals the possibility of leading a meaningful life despite the suffering that living involves. Above, I noted that on his view the past "preserves" us *for better or worse.* Like other existentialists, Frankl seeks to impress on us a sense of responsibility: we define ourselves through our attitudes and choices, how we wrestle with the situations into which we are thrown. Given Frankl's view of the past, it is true that the meaningless, stupid, and terrible things we do are stored in the "granaries of the past," too. This may be an unnerving thought; one might worry that the past preserves too much (everything), and perhaps more than we would like it to preserve. However, the problem of meaning contained in these worries is not a problem that is posed by death; it is a problem about how we make use of possibilities and respond to the circumstances of our lives.

Frankl offers an "imperative" of action to capture his notion of responsibility and the permanence of the past: "Live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrong the first time as you are about to act now."[26] This seems to be a twist—a second coming, so to speak—of Nietzsche's myth of eternal return: to imagine that our life and all our choices will be repeated infinitely. However, Frankl is not only reiterating the idea that what we do becomes eternally true. His imperative also suggests the idea of a "second chance" at meaning: we cannot change the past, but we can do something different (and more or less meaningful) *now*, which will then become part of the unchanging past.[27] In other words, regardless of how we have failed or suffered in the past, it remains possible to add something more, and something more meaningful, for as long as we are alive. Although we cannot change the past, we can add something better to it.

3. *Ontological Considerations: The Growing Block Theory of Time*

Frankl's insistence on the reality of the past and the indeterminate status of the future resembles *the growing block theory of time* (GBT) and related views according to which there is an ontological asymmetry between the past and the future.[28] GBT holds that the past and present are real, and that the future is not.

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[26] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Postscript 1984," 150.

[27] For narrativists about meaning, this point may be especially important, since it captures the idea that even if there are bad (or boring or meaningless) parts in one's life story, we have a chance to take the story in a different, perhaps redemptive, direction. For any naturalist, the story will always have to end, and cannot end in an ongoing "happily ever after" fashion.

[28] Storrs McCall's branching (or shrinking) future view also seems to be in basic agreement with

C.D. Broad characterizes the view in this way:

> Nothing has happened to the present by becoming past except that fresh slices of existence have been added to the total history of the world. The past is thus as real as the present…the essence of a present event is, not that it preceded future events, but that there is quite literally *nothing* to which it has the relation of precedence.[29]

The future is the "edge" of becoming. Although Broad appears to have abandoned the view in later work—especially the idea that the past is "as real" as the present—several philosophers have revived and defended GBT in recent years.[30]

GBT opposes both *presentism* and *eternalism*.[31] Presentists hold that only the present is real: the past *was* real but is no more. Traces of the past may remain in the present. The future *will become* real when it is present. Eternalists hold that *all* times are real and that the distinction between past, present, and future corresponds to our (illusory) experience of time rather than an ontological difference.

GBT captures something that may be appealing about presentism—the future isn't real; it hasn't happened yet, and it may be *open*—as well as something appealing about eternalism: the past is real; forgetting or burying it cannot change what *really* happened. Of course, GBT also then inherits what each of those views finds objectionable in the other.

Critics of GBT allege that it fails to distinguish past and present: the past *happened* and that is true, but to say that it still "exists" makes it sound like past

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Frankl's view of time. See McCall, *The Consistency of Arithmetic and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2014). On McCall's view the future "exists" as a branched set of possibilities; as one possibility is actualized (and becomes present) the other possible branches "drop off." The differences between McCall's view and those of various advocates of GBT are not especially important here. Roughly, McCall seems willing to talk of the reality of future possibilities in a manner that is absent, for example, from Broad's 1925 articulation of GBT. For Broad, there is no sense in which the future exists: "when an event becomes, it *comes into existence*, and it was not anything at all until it had become" (68). An obvious question is whether being a possible event is *not* a way—if only thinly—of being "something."

[29] C.D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (Kegan Paul, 1923): 66. A similar idea is expressed in ancient thought by Seneca in "On the Shortness of Life."

[30] See for example, Michael Tooley, *Time, Tense, and Causation* (Oxford University Press, 1997), Fabrice Correa and Sven Rosenkranz, *Nothing to Come* (Springer, 2018), and R.A. Briggs and G.A. Forbes, "The future, and what might have been," *Philosophical Studies* 176 (2019): 505-532.

[31] For further discussion, see Kristie Miller, "Presentism, Eternalism, and the Growing Block," in Heather Dyke and Adrian Bardon, eds., *A Companion to the Philosophy of Time* (Blackwell, 2013): 345-364.

events are still somehow happening today.[32] But Caesar is not still crossing the Rubicon and dinosaurs are not still walking the earth. They are *gone*. Presentists can agree (with GBT and eternalism) that there are truths about the past, so it may seem unclear what GBT aims to gain by emphasizing the "realness" of the past. However, advocates of GBT argue that truths about past events are fixed by those events, so the past must continue to exist to serve this truth-grounding function. Things *happened* in the past, but to have happened *is* to be real.[33]

However, if the past must be real to ground truths about the past, then GBT's conception of the indeterminate future seems questionable. We make statements now about the future, and according to the law of the excluded middle, statements must be true or false. What makes them true or false would be some future state of affairs. Thus, the future must already exist (as the past must continue to exist, on this way of thinking) to ground the truth value of statements about the future. Defenders of GBT respond that the law of the excluded middle does not apply to statements about future contingents, which are *indeterminate*. The laws of two-valued logic apply to timeless and settled truths (what is past or present) only. One possible future will *become* true, but that hasn't happened yet.

The attractiveness of GBT may be tied to whether one accepts determinism or indeterminism. Some defenders of GBT, such as Tooley, contend that GBT is compatible with determinism—even a deterministic future is not *real* until it occurs.[34] However, GBT's *appeal* may depend on the existence of an open future. Frankl's existentialist conception of human freedom assumes indeterminism, though a determinist can agree that our actions "create" truths even if those actions are determined. The past endures for eternalists, too, and its traces (often) endure for presentists. Nevertheless, the specifics of Frankl's claims about time seem most aligned with GBT's commitment to an ontological asymmetry between past and future.[35]

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[32] See David Braddon-Mitchell, "How do we know it is now now?" *Analysis* 64, no. 3 (2004): 199-203.

[33] See Peter Forrest, "The real but dead past: a reply to Braddon-Mitchell," *Analysis* 64, no. 4 (2004): 358-362

[34] Tooley, 26-7.

[35] Eternalists could make a similar argument as Frankl's about the enduring nature of the past. For example, see Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Prometheus, 1995), p. 231. Presentists may also argue that the past is always preserved in the present, though will have to respond in their own way to the pessimist's worry that *all* will cease to be at some point, thereby destroying all prior meaning. Perhaps if something must always exist, there will always be a present in which the traces of the past are somehow preserved. Insofar as I am interested in how Frankl's ideas about the past serve as a response to the pessimistic argument, their compatibility with other views

4. *Objections to Frankl's Real Past as a Response to the Pessimist*

Suppose we grant GBT to Frankl or develop the point about an enduring past from a different perspective on the metaphysics of time. Even if we are satisfied with some notion of an enduring past, there remain other questions about whether this counts as a compelling response to the pessimist's argument that death undermines the meaningfulness of life. Here I anticipate some objections and suggest some replies.

First, recall that Frankl rejects the idea that a past life or accomplishment continues to be meaningful only if it is remembered. Even if that response is reasonable, I can imagine the following further objections:

A. *Frankl's ideas are not compatible with naturalism:*

A naturalist might balk at some of Frankl's language ("the spiritual self") and with the idea that the past is "real" regardless of what evidence it leaves behind. Frankl's past is itself "supernatural."

Response:

If this is supernaturalism, it is at least considerably different than various theistic versions of supernaturalism.[36] Perhaps it would be better to think of it as a species of *non-naturalism* to avoid confusion. I leave it to others to consider how we ought to classify the facts that we create through our choices and actions. However, note that the picture Frankl presents does not seem to require anything supernatural in the more ordinary sense of that term.

B. *Frankl's ontological consolation is hollow and involves changing the subject:*

Recall Woody Allen's quip that he wants to live on in his apartment rather than in the hearts of his countrymen. Even if the past is "real," we will still be a *dead* part of it. Frankl's claim that we only become fully real or complete at the moment of death is mere wordplay: to be dead is no longer to exist! It may be true that I lived a meaningful life (if I did), but I am not identical to the facts about my life. Facts may endure, but people do

about the nature of time is an advantage. My thanks to a colleague and an anonymous reviewer for both raising this issue, and to the latter for reminding me about Singer's remarks.

[36] See Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Part II.

not. Thus, Frankl's argument does not, according to this objection, provide a legitimate refutation of the pessimist's premise that human life does not endure. What endures on his view is something else.

Response:

It is true that Frankl's argument involves a shift in thinking about what it means to endure, since literal immortality is off the table. However, one might attempt a *tu quoque* reply: if Frankl's argument is hollow, then so is the pessimist's argument, since it implies that nothing, except perhaps timeless mathematical and logical truths (or a God) can be meaningful, since they are the only things that can endure in a manner that is immune to death. Even if that were an interesting way to think about what can have ("ultimate") meaning, it would also be true that the facts we create in our lives—having become part of the enduring past—would then have that kind of abiding meaning, too.

One might suggest that Frankl's point is that although our *lives* do not endure, we are able to create facts—or truths—that endure. The problem with the pessimist's argument would then be that it ignores that our transient lives can give rise to something else that meets the condition of the EDT, and *that* makes human life meaningful even though it does not itself endure (biologically).[37] However, this line of thought still assumes the EDT, since the meaningfulness of our transient lives is anchored in creating something enduring. Furthermore, recall Frankl's "paradoxical" remark that one's "life" is only complete at the moment of death. The facts we create through the course of our lives are not something separate from our lives; they are the totality of our lives. That our lives become, on Frankl's view, fixed truths is a powerful idea but perhaps also an upsetting one, as the next potential objection recognizes.

C. *The "real past" preserves too much: all the misery and anti-meaning, too:*

Section 2 above anticipates this worry. If the past is real and endures, then all the terrible things we do or suffer, all the time we wasted, and all the relatively meaningless lives are also preserved "safely" in the past. Given all the terrors and disappointments of human history, the past is a

[37] This idea was suggested by an anonymous reviewer.

horror show. At a personal level, that the past endures means that one cannot erase past traumas or wrongs that may be difficult to bear; adopting Frankl's view about the permanence of the past might make such adversities even more unbearable.[38]

Response:

As above, Frankl needn't deny any of this, at least up to a point. Importantly, worries about the quantity of past misery and meaninglessness is a somewhat different issue regarding the pessimistic view that the quality of life, on balance, is bad. Sparring here with the pessimist over the proper accounting of the overall quality of life would take us too far afield, since it involves questions about how to tally the meaningfulness of life as a whole.

On Frankl's view, our lives will continue to have whatever meaning (or lack thereof) that they attained while we lived. While there isn't much we can do about bad luck that cuts short our lives and interrupts some of the meaningful projects or relationships in which we might be engaged, for Frankl, meaning is created through what we make of whatever life we have. Even if life is not as bad as the pessimists allege, life is often difficult, and we have limited time, which we squander at our own peril. One of life's difficulties is finding ways of coming to terms with the traumas or misdeeds in our own past; for Frankl, doing so can constitute a meaningful achievement. Frankl describes his own view as "tragic optimism," because he recognizes that, on the one hand, we must all confront the "tragic triad" of pain, guilt, and death.[39] On the other hand, his optimism is that there are meaningful ways of confronting and responding to each of these. People are not always able to do so—that is undeniable—and even some who do may have done (or suffered) terrible things that may seem to outweigh any later achievements. What is "preserved" in the past, as a metaphysical matter, is not something we can pick and choose, but how best to *respond* to the past is, for Frankl, an open question. In some cases, it may be important to resolve to "never forget"—for the sake of our own dignity or honesty or in remembrance of those who were not as lucky as us. In other cases, it may be better to try to forgive and forget and to train our attention on meaningful possibilities that remain. And so on.

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[38] The personal point was urged by an anonymous reviewer.

[39] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 137ff.

D. *The value (including the meaning) of the past diminishes over time:*

Frankl's view suggests that the meaningfulness of a life is fixed, perhaps by reference to timeless standards such as acting with dignity, courage, creativity, and so forth. However, (1) it is often the case that we judge the meaning of past phases or accomplishments in our lives differently over time. Sometimes we revise our judgments downward: what once was a meaningful accomplishment may later not seem like such a big deal. We may even agree that *at the time*, it was quite meaningful, but that its meaning has diminished with the passing of time. (2) As other things become true of our lives (for better or worse), the relative value of that one meaningful thing becomes less and less of the whole story of our lives. Similarly, after we die, our personal story becomes less and less of the whole story of the meaning of everything. (3) A different way of making the point might be to suggest that the *effects* of our lives diminish over time. The ripples and waves we make settle over time and are then as nothing.

Response:

Of course, our past and present judgments may be inaccurate. Perhaps we overrated the meaningfulness of past achievements (or failures) or are underrating them now. In addition, we may sometimes find a past event or experience to be more meaningful than we took it to be when it occurred. Our current attitudes aren't a decisive guide on such questions. Consider, for example, Parfit's arguments that we tend to be future biased in ways that are bad for us.[40] One way in which future bias is bad for us is that it leads us to think that the significance of past events is less than the significance of present or future events. Of course, from a practical standpoint, it often makes sense to care about the future in a way that we do not care about the past (especially if we take the future to be open): we can affect what becomes true in a way that we cannot affect what already is true.

Point (2) offers a different account of diminishing meaning. It may be tempting to think that as we add more to our lives, the relative value of any part decreases. That may be true in the sense that it might count for less in an averaged score. If I only do one meaningful thing in my life and then spend the rest of my life like a couch potato, my qualitative score will

[40] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 8.

decrease the longer I vegetate on the couch. But that is not a point about *time*. That is, time is not the diminishing factor; it's the addition of other life details that are relevant to an overall assessment. The same point is true about the critic's leap from this point about the quality of an individual life to its contribution to the "meaning of everything." One's life being past is not the source of this diminishing significance within the whole. And the point is strange, since it entails that every birth makes one's own life less meaningful. It is less of the whole. Averages do not seem to be the only relevant consideration in tabulating meaningfulness.

The final claim about the diminishment of meaning over time (3) suggests that meaning diminishes as the effects of our lives and deeds dissipate over time. Here we might call to mind the ruins of Ozymandias' kingdom in Shelley's poem or the more homely ruins of forgotten pioneers in various parks: these people may have led meaningful lives, but this can mean little to us except to remind us that we will likely have a similar fate. Few of us leave significant traces that last for millennia. Even that would not be long enough to satisfy some pessimists: the collapse of the galaxy still looms.

Of course, some people do leave significantly lasting traces. If meaning is a matter of continuing effects, then the lives of people like Socrates and Plato have become *more* meaningful over time through their influence on a growing number of people. The past might in this sense sometimes become more meaningful. However, in the case of continuing influence, we should notice that if Socrates and Plato had not led meaningful lives *in their own time*, we wouldn't be admiring and learning from them today. The meaning precedes the memory of it and is not constituted by it. Furthermore, while some lives make meaningful "splashes," others may be committed to leaving and preserving things as they are, as in the outdoor recreation ethic that advises us to "leave no trace" when we go hiking or camping. Where the meaning of an activity is atelic, leaving traces may be entirely beside the point. What matters is only that it was done.

Conclusion

Although Frankl's view about the reality of the past may seem to contradict the earlier, moderating set of responses to the pessimist (insofar as they involve accepting the transience of our lives and efforts), these different responses are

complementary. Frankl urges us to consider our lives under the enduring aspect of truth—the past is past, and yet it *is*. We create and become truths that endure. Trisel, Setiya, and Wolf urge us to be realistic in our expectations and standards, and to consider the meaningfulness of projects that have value in themselves or through our relationships with others. If we look for a point beyond such activities and relationships that justifies them, we may find that there is no *further* point, but that does not mean there is no point. Whereas the pessimist sees death as making everything we do pointless, we may always respond that death makes their pessimism pointless as well.[41]

[41] Early versions of this paper were presented at the Kentucky Philosophical Association 2023 Meeting and the Fifth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life. Thanks especially to Beau Branson for suggesting I look further into the philosophy of time to interpret Frankl's view and to audiences at both meetings for helpful questions. Thanks also to Steve Parchment for detailed comments on a draft and to the two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

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[Review Article]

Meaning in Life in the Context of Psychopathology and Personal Recovery

Bernice Brijan*

Abstract

At present, mental health care is characterised by a tendency to pay more attention to meaning and sense-making. Among other things, this finds expression in a focus on recovery-oriented care. Underlying the recovery vision is a different understanding of health, which is characterized by the view that challenges and suffering are inherent to life and that people have the capacity to cope with those challenges. However, it is not clear how exactly this is to be understood in relation to meaning in life. This article aims to address this issue and to develop a deeper understanding of and a different perspective on the phenomenon of recovery. Starting from a different way of thinking about illness and health in relation to coping with life challenges, an overview of current recovery thinking and its shortcomings is given. It is argued that meaning in life plays a central role in recovery. However, the notions of meaning and sense-making as they are used in the recovery literature, are relatively limited concepts. This is because several aspects have received insufficient attention thus far. As a result, what is missing in current recovery thinking is how meaning in life relates to mental illness as crisis. The shortcomings in recovery thinking thus hinder a deep understanding of recovery. It is suggested that one way to approach this issue is by viewing recovery as an existential phenomenon. This allows for a better understanding of the relationship between coping with challenges and meaning in life. Importantly, this approach suggests fruitful ways to understand the interrelatedness of illness and health in recovery, inviting a phenomenological perspective. It also allows for incorporating themes of loss and grief as crucial aspects of the recovery process, thereby resulting in a better understanding of the relationship between coping with challenges and meaning in life.

Introduction

In present times, there is a renewed and growing focus on meaning and spirituality in psychiatry, including spiritual care. Furthermore, the interfaces between philosophy and psychiatry are developing rapidly. There are several reasons for this move towards a more holistic focus in mental health care. More than ever, psychiatry is questioning its own paradigm[1] and, more than ever, psychiatry has come to play a central role in themes such as individual well-being

* Ph.D. student and lecturer, Tilburg University/University of York. Address: Tilburg University, Warandelaan 2, 5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands. Email: b.n.m.brijan@tilburguniversity.edu

[1] S. de Haan, *Enactive Psychiatry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

and debates on the healthy society.[2] Such a context enables different and renewed understandings of illness and health. A movement that is crucial in this regard is that of recovery thinking.

Attention for the phenomenon of recovery in the context of severe mental illness has been increasing over the past decennia. It is currently often referred to as a guiding vision of mental health care institutions and policies.[3] Recovery thinking is identified as "a way of living a satisfying, hopeful, and contributing life even within the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness."[4] In recovery thinking, the situation in question is not approached primarily in terms of a psychiatric condition, disorder, or illness, but rather in terms of a crisis or disruption. This crisis or disruption is understood to be a break in human meaning and purpose. The challenge of recovery is therefore not only to come out of the crisis but also to develop new identities and new meanings.

Recovery as a phenomenon thus has close connections to the increased attention for meaning and spirituality in psychiatry. However, there are also some inherent shortcomings to current recovery thinking that hinder a good understanding of those relationships. As will be argued, current recovery thinking is characterised by a tendency to focus on 'change for the better'. This manifests itself in a predominant focus on the present or post-crisis period rather than on the crisis or disruption itself and in a tendency to place much emphasis on the individual and their psyche rather than on the larger reality of their world. Consequently, recovery thinking lacks a theory on the crisis itself and how this relates to meaning in life.

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[2] D. Denys & G. Meynen, G. (eds.). *Het tweede handboek psychiatrie en filosofie*. Den Haag: Boom, 2020.

[3] See: M. Slade, *Personal recovery and mental illness: a guide for mental health professionals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; M. Slade & E. Longden, *The empirical evidence about mental health and recovery: how likely, how long, and what helps?* MI Fellowship, 2015; L. Davidson & D. Roe, "Recovery from versus recovery in serious mental illness: one strategy for lessening confusion plaguing recovery," *Journal of Mental Health* 16:4 (2007), 459-470. See also: Akwa GGZ. (2021). Herstelondersteuning. Retrieved January 8, 2023, from https://www.ggzstandaarden.nl/generieke-modules/herstelondersteuning/; Akwa GGZ. (2023). Zingeving in de psychische hulpverlening. Retrieved January 8, 2024 from https://www.ggzstandaarden.nl/zorgstandaarden/zingeving-in-de-psychische-hulpverlening/introductie/.

[4] W.A. Anthony, "Recovery from mental illness: The guiding vision of the mental health service system in the 1990s," *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal* 16:4 (1993), 11-23. Assessed in reprinted version, 521-538 (527)

This article therefore aims to develop a new perspective on the phenomenon of recovery. Starting from a different way of thinking about illness and health in relation to coping with life challenges, an overview of current recovery thinking is given. On this basis, several shortcomings in current conceptualisations of recovery thinking are identified. Then, it will be argued that an existential approach serves as both an underlying and as a connecting perspective to those shortcomings. Furthermore, it will be argued that an existential approach enables to shed light on important aspects of recovery in the context of severe mental illness that have so far received insufficient attention, namely, the nature of mental illness in terms of crisis. An understanding of crisis *as crisis* will be developed with the help of phenomenology. The distinctiveness of phenomenological understanding aligns with what is lacking in the recovery tradition and allows for a better understanding of the role of grief over losses associated with the condition. This perspective has important implications for a deeper understanding of meaning and spirituality in psychiatry.

1. Illness, Health, and Recovery: An Existential Perspective

1.1 Challenges and Suffering as Inherent to Life

The previous decennia have seen a growing attention for the phenomenon of recovery. The background of the development associated with recovery thinking is a view that arose in the mental health care sector from the early 1960s and 1970s onwards, and particularly in the critical patients' movement, namely, that the medical-scientific model of diagnosis and treatment is not sufficiently capable of addressing a person's situation in the context of severe mental illness. Central to a medical-scientific perspective is the view that health is concerned with the body's ability to function, viewing health as a state of normal function that could be disrupted from time to time by disease.[5] A biomedical approach thus tends to focus mainly on biological processes underlying psychiatric symptoms. Medical

[5] Within the biomedical model, an illness is always explained with one or more physical malfunctions at a lower level of organisation. The biomedical model brings about some specific ways to understand health, illness, and disease. First, illness is always reducible to a physical, biological disease. It concerns purely the physical body, which is seen as analysable into separate parts. 'Health' is seen merely as the absence of physical signs of disease. See: E. Rocca & R.L. Anjum, "Complexity, Reductionism and the Biomedical Model," in: R.L. Anjum, S. Copeland, & E. Rocca (Eds). *Rethinking Causality, Complexity and Evidence for the Unique Patient* (Springer, Cham, 2020), 75-94.

help that is given is therefore often associated with a certain desired outcome that is approached in terms of objective and measurable facts, such as the reduction of symptoms, the improvement of a person's functioning, and the decrease of relapses. However, this is at the expense of social, experiential, and existential dimensions of psychopathology. Although systemized knowledge through diagnostic terms can be very valuable for treatment, a tendency to seek explanations in terms of dysregulation or disorders also brings the danger of altering the language that is used for describing the painful challenges in life.[6]

What therefore began to emerge instead is the view that psychiatry should not only be concerned with the causes and treatment of disturbed experiences but with the *whole person*, and that health should not be conceived as mere absence of disease but instead as full *well-being.*[7] Viewing health in terms of well-being reflects an understanding of health that is not based upon the absence of disease but, instead, one that is in close association with (changing) life challenges. More specifically, it places an emphasis on the ability of people to deal with those life challenges. This implies that health is not understood to be a thing, or something that we possess, but rather a way of living. The underlying view is that there is an active part to health that is concerned with gaining resilience, that is, the capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties, as well as with self-control and empowerment.

Importantly, understanding health in relation to life's challenges denotes a shift towards viewing health as something that cannot be well understood apart from life itself. Gadamer associates health with the experience of being unhindered, ready for, and open to everything.[8] However, life is full of hindrances and contrasts, and there is often a lot going on that we are not particularly ready for, which may result in closing down rather than opening up. A focus on well-being reflects the possibility that certain experiences, such as moments of vitality, joy, and gratefulness can be felt precisely because the opposite is also known. Put

[6] P.-E. Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life – On the Existential Dimension of Health," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022), article 803792, 1-7 (3).
[7] J.E. Mezzich, M. Botbol, G.N. Christodoulou, C.R. Cloninger & I.M. Salloum (eds.). *Person Centered Psychiatry*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2016. See also: P. Wagner, A. Perales, R. Armas, O. Codas, R. De los Santos, D. Elio-Calvo, J. Mendoza-Vega, M. Arce, J.L. Calderón, L. Llosa, J. Saavedra, O. Ugarte, H. Vildózola & J.E. Mezzich, "Latin American Bases and Perspectives on Person Centered Medicine and Health," *International Journal of Person Centered Medicine* 4 (2014), 220-227.
[8] H.-G. Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

differently, meaning in life may be experienced because there is also stress and worry at times and an awareness of suffering.[9] Such a view suggests that health may have to do with the ability to be present in the contrasts of life, and with our ability to handle suffering, as an unavoidable fact of life.[10]

1.2 Recovery in the Context of Mental Illness

One domain which has been greatly influenced by this other understanding of illness and health is recovery thinking. In the past, practice in mental health was guided by the belief that individuals with serious mental illnesses do not recover. The course of their illness was either seen pessimistically, as deteriorative, or optimistically, as a maintenance course.[11] During the previous decennia, however, research has shown that recovery is possible.[12] More specifically, it has been increasingly acknowledged regarding people suffering from severe mental illness that change does not only (or even primarily) consist in symptomatic changes but in changes that concern the interpretation and management of the condition as well as the meaning and value that are given to the experiences.[13] In other words, it is important to place symptoms within the wider framework of a person's existence, thereby acknowledging that a person may not only seek a resolution of the situation, but also an aspiration to understand how this situation fits into their existence.[14] As a result of this acknowledgment, an emphasis on the subjective and personal aspects of psychopathology has gradually gained more foothold in

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[9] Baumeister, R.F., Vohs, K.D., Aaker, J.L., & Garbinsky, E.N., "Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 8 (2013), 505-516; G. Vaillant, *Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith*. Chatsworth, California: Harmony, 2008. See also: See also: W.G. Parrott, *The Positive Side of Negative Emotions*. New York: Guilford Publications, 2014.

[10] Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life," 2.

[11] M. Farkas, "The vision of recovery today: what it is and what it means for services," *World psychiatry: official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) 6*:2 (2007), 68-74 (68).

[12] M. Slade, *Personal recovery and mental illness: a guide for mental health professionals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; M. Slade & E. Longden, *The empirical evidence about mental health and recovery: how likely, how long, and what helps?* MI Fellowship, 2015; L. Davidson & D. Roe, "Recovery from versus recovery in serious mental illness: one strategy for lessening confusion plaguing recovery," *Journal of Mental Health* 16:4 (2007), 459-470.

[13] R. Macpherson, F. Pesola, M. Leamy, V. Bird, C. Le Boutillier, J. Williams, & M. Slade, "The relationship between clinical and recovery dimensions of outcome in mental health," *Schizophrenia research* 175:1-3 (2016), 142-147. See also: K. Aho (ed.). *Existential Medicine. Essays on Health and Illness*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018; K. Aho, *Existentialism. An Introduction*. New York: Polity, 2020.

[14] G. Stanghellini et al. (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 1-2.

psychiatry.

The notion of recovery was taken up in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands as a specific concept and alternative to the term medical cure.[15] Initially, efforts in the recovery movement, which were carried out by both patients and professional groups in the mental health field, consisted in advocating for person-centered care, greater self-determination for those with a mental illness, and an enhanced focus on restoring functioning for individuals above and beyond symptom reduction.[16] In a later stage, this was combined with the development of a community-based service system, which emphasized the importance of a supporting network of people for those who are in recovery.[17] Those two elements – the development of the concept of a community support system and the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of severe mental illness – laid the groundwork for the recovery vision.

Particularly Bill Anthony's description of recovery as a "truly human unifying experience" reflects the view that recovery is about dealing with the catastrophes of life, where one possible catastrophe is a person's confrontation with illness and, more specifically, mental illness.[18] In this view of recovery, a close relation between recovery and health comes to expression: recovery is understood to be aimed at increasing health amidst the mix of catastrophe and suffering, and joy and growth, that human life offers.[19] It is in this regard that recovery is understood to involve aspects that are universally recognizable for all people, because they are not limited to the context of a mental illness only. Taking recovery seriously thus means appreciating that a central part of healing processes is about viewing catastrophes and suffering as being inherent to life itself. It offers a different approach to life challenges in general, as something that is not to be eliminated but that is to be dealt with. As such, one of the major strengths of recovery thinking is that recovery focuses on individual strengths and abilities rather than on deficits and pathologies. Recovery thinking recognizes that there are paths to

[15] S. Ramon, B. Healy, & N. Renouf, "Recovery from mental illness as an emergent concept and practice in Australia and the UK," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 53 (2007), 108-122.
[16] L. Davidson, "The Recovery Movement: Implications for Mental Health Care and Enabling People to Participate Fully in Life," *Health Affairs* 35:6 (2016), 1091-1097 (1091). See also: L. Davidson, J. Rakfeldt, & J. Strauss, *The Roots of the Recovery Movement in Psychiatry: Lessons Learned.* Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2010.
[17] Anthony, "Recovery from mental illness," 523.
[18] Anthony, "Recovery from mental illness," 523.
[19] Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life," 2.

health that go beyond the elimination of illness and that rather have to do with relating to suffering in friendly, caring, and accepting ways, both in others and oneself.[20] This finds expression in placing trust in the individual to know their own experience and to be able to take an active role in their treatment as well as in creating environments where a person's suffering can be met with recognition and compassion.

2. Meaning in Life in the Context of Illness and Recovery

2.1 Personal Recovery in Mental Illness

Since its introduction, the recovery vision has developed in various directions. At present, most models distinguish between various aspects within recovery, or types of recovery, such as clinical recovery, personal recovery, functional recovery, and social recovery.[21] Clinical recovery primarily involves the remission of symptoms. Functional recovery concerns the promotion (rehabilitation) of physical, psychological, and social functions that have been reduced or impaired as a result of the condition. Social recovery concerns the improvement of the individual's position in terms of housing, work and income, and social relationships.[22] The fourth and last dimension is personal recovery.

When it comes to personal recovery, recovery thinking is characterised by the view that there is a process that might run parallel to, but that is not synchronous with, nor similar to, symptom reduction and/or being cured from mental illness.[23] This becomes clear from various definitions used to explicate what recovery in the context of mental illness comprises. For instance, one definition states that recovery is concerned with recovering a life worth living by finding coherence, sense, and hope despite or even because of having symptoms.[24] Elsewhere,

[20] Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life," 3.
[21] J.C. Van der Stel, *Psychische gezondheidszorg op maat. Op weg naar een precieze en persoonlijke psychiatrie*. Bohn Stafleu van Loghum, 2015.
[22] S. Castelein, M.E. Timmerman, PHAMOUS investigators, M. van der Gaag, & E. Visser, "Clinical, societal and personal recovery in schizophrenia spectrum disorders across time: states and annual transitions," *The British journal of psychiatry: the journal of mental science* 219:1 (2021), 401-408. See also: Van der Stel, *Psychische gezondheidszorg op maat.*
[23] W. Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," in: E. Olsman, B.N.M. Brijan, X.J.S. Rosie, & J.K. Muthert (eds.), *Recovery. The Interface Between Psychiatry and Spiritual Care*. Utrecht: Eburon, 2023, 26-37 (29).
[24] M.E. Barber, "Recovery as the new medical model for psychiatry," *Psychiatric Services* 63:3 (2012), 277-279; J. van Weeghel, C. van Zelst, D. Boertien & I. Hasson-Ohayon, "Conceptualizations,

recovery has been defined as "learning to live better in the face of mental illness."[25] The phenomenon of recovery thus seems to be concerned with the impact of a psychiatric condition on a person's life. As Bill Anthony (1993) states in this regard:

> People with mental illness may have to recover from the stigma they have incorporated into their very being; from the iatrogenic effects of treatment settings; from lack of recent opportunities for self-determination; from the negative side effects of unemployment; and from crushed dreams. Recovery is often a complex, time-consuming process.[26]

Central to Anthony's description are the consequences that a psychiatric condition has in many different areas in life and what it involves to 'come to terms with' or 'learning to live with' that. This process may take place long after symptoms have diminished but also amidst or despite of ongoing symptoms. For this reason, it is referred to as personal recovery. While recovery in the clinical sense, from a biomedical perspective, is concerned with 'cure and care', recovery in the personal sense is rather about 'heal and deal.'[27]

The process of personal recovery has been defined in various ways. One definition is that recovery refers to a "personal process of regaining control of one's own life after a mental health crisis."[28] This definition gives expression to two important aspects of recovery thinking. The first is that a psychiatric condition is, in fact, a crisis or disruption. In this context, Kusters states: "The crisis or disruption, according to still essentially humanist jargon, is a break in human sense and meaning, a loss of previous identifications, and a crisis of signification."[29] Recovery is therefore understood, first and foremost, to involve the challenge of coming out of the crisis. In literature on recovery this is often

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Assessments, and Implications of Personal Recovery in Mental Illness: A Scoping Review of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses," *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* 42:2 (2019), 169-181.

[25] L. Davidson, "Considering recovery as a process: Or, life is not an outcome," in: A. Rudnick (ed.), *Recovery of people with mental illness. Philosophical and related perspectives.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 252-263 (261).

[26] Anthony, "Recovery from mental illness," 527.

[27] See also: J. van der Kamp and T. Plochg, "The Health System Quartet: Four basic systems – cure, care, heal and deal – to foster the co-production of sustained health," in: J.P. Sturmberg (ed.), *Embracing Complexity in Health.* Berlin: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 113-123.

[28] W. Boevink, *HEE! Over Herstel, Empowerment en Ervaringsdeskundigheid in de psychiatrie* [Doctoral Dissertation, Maastricht University]. Trimbos-instituut, 2017, 144.

[29] Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," 30.

associated with recognition, working through the crisis, and integrating it in a life beyond it.[30] The second aspect of recovery thinking, then, is that recovery is a unique process in which a person with a psychiatric condition tries to pick up the threads, regains control, and gives their life content and direction again. This dual aspect of recovery has also been described as follows by Patricia Deegan:

> Recovery often involves a transformation of the self wherein one both accepts one's limitation and discovers a new world of possibility. This is the paradox of recovery, i.e., that in accepting what we cannot do or be, we begin to discover who we can be and what we can do.[31]

The understanding here is that the discovery of a new world of possibility is, at a certain point, accompanied by the development of new identities and new meanings. In other words, the process of personal recovery is aimed at growth, change, and transformation to a more integrated self. Current recovery models attempt to identify various dimensions that play a role in personal recovery. For instance, the CHIME framework distinguishes *Connectedness*, *Hope and optimism*, *Identity*, *Meaning in life*, and *Empowerment*.[32] There is thus a strong focus in recovery thinking on the role of meaning and sense-making within the process in which one gives one's life content and direction again. In this regard, the aspect of 'Meaning in life' is described as the meaning found in mental health experiences, and in leading a meaningful life in relation to social roles and social goals.

2.2 Shortcomings of Recovery Thinking

Despite the value of recovery thinking for mental health care, however, current recovery thinking also has some limitations. Shortcomings of current conceptualizations of recovery mainly have to do with specific emphases in recovery thinking. Firstly, there is a bias towards what could be called 'a change for the better'. It is in this context that meaning and sense-making and, more

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[30] Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," 30.

[31] P.E. Deegan, "Recovery and the Conspiracy of Hope," Presented at The Sixth Annual Mental Health Services Conference of Australia and New Zealand. Brisbane, Australia, 1996, 13.

[32] M. Leamy, V. Bird, C. Le Boutillier, J. Williams, & M. Slade, "Conceptual framework for personal recovery in mental health: systematic review and narrative synthesis," *The British journal of psychiatry: the journal of mental science* 199:6 (2017), 445-452.

generally, working towards a meaningful life receives much attention. Because life challenges are viewed as something to be dealt with, there is an emphasis to work on realizing this change. This bias may thus be understood in relation to the different understanding of illness and health that is underlying recovery thinking. However, although an emphasis on change for the better is a fine aspiration in health care, there is the danger of losing sight of other aspects in the recovery process, such as what is hurt, what is vulnerable, or what is lost. Tragedy is sometimes permanent. Although this deserves attention in and of itself, it tends to be overshadowed by a predominant focus on improvement, empowerment and increasing autonomy.

Secondly, and relatedly, there is a tendency in recovery models to divert the focus away from the crisis itself and, instead, to place an emphasis on what could be called the 'present, post-crisis period.' This stems from the assumption that the solution to the crisis or disruption is thought to be found primarily in a confirmation of the mundanity and a return to everyday life.[33] What is meant by post-crisis, in this context, is the period following on a mental health crisis. However, what is lacking in current recovery literature is a developed understanding of the crisis *as crisis*.[34] A related implication of placing an emphasis on the present, post-crisis period is that it is hard for people to continue understanding and giving meaning to what they experienced during their crisis. This concerns both what is lost as well as insights that are gained, which requires understanding that "a crisis or disruption is not only of a biopsychosocial nature, but also of an existential, spiritual, and philosophical nature."[35]

Thirdly, although many models of recovery recognise relationships or connectedness with others and the world as a component of the recovery process, there is an overemphasis on the 'inner', subjective experiences of people experiencing severe mental illness. In other words, a form of individualism is underpinning many conceptualisations of recovery. This is further accompanied by a predominant psychological approach to recovery, resulting in an emphasis on the individual and their psyche.[36] It is, however, questionable to what extent a psychological focus is suitable to understand the disruptive character of mental

[33] Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," 32.
[34] S.R. Stuart, L. Tansey, & E. Quayle, "What we talk about when we talk about recovery: a systematic review and best-fit framework synthesis of qualitative literature," *Journal of Mental Health* 26 (2017), 291-304.
[35] Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," 32.
[36] Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," 31.

illness. A psychological perspective is bound to the so-called natural stance or attitude we take unto the world. It takes for granted that one finds oneself in a world and departs from there. Disruptive experiences, however, bring to light precisely elements of existence that are usually not experienced in the mundane and everyday life. As such, a psychological perspective cannot understand how a person's being-in-the-world is fundamentally altered in severe mental illness.

The various shortcomings to recovery thinking altogether get in the way of understanding the phenomenon of recovery in depth. Although the metaphors and practices surrounding recovery are embedded in a body of thought where people have meaningful lives, the specific conception of meaning and sense-making in recovery thinking diverts the attention away from the role and impact of (permanent) vulnerability and loss in relation to the meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) of one's life during mental health crisis and its aftermath.

3. Towards an Existential Approach to Recovery

3.1 The Interrelatedness of Illness and Health in Recovery

To address the limitations of current recovery thinking, a different approach is required. This approach must be rooted in the underlying view of recovery thinking, namely, that illness (and suffering) are inherent aspects of life, and that life challenges are something to be dealt with. One possible way to do this, it is argued, is by approaching recovery from an existential perspective or, in other words, by viewing recovery as an existential phenomenon.

The term existential is usually defined as "of, relating to, or affirming existence."[37] This, however, does not explain the meaning of existential in most contexts. Another way to understand what 'existential' means may therefore be to start with Martin Heidegger's definition. For him, 'existential' refers to the ontological structures of human existence, formally defined as being-there (*Dasein*).[38] 'Existentials' are structures that form human experience. The fundamental basis in this structure is "Caring" (*Sorge*), a quality of engagement in the world. "Understanding" (*Verstehen*), "Being-with" (*Mit-Sein*), "Being-toward-death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*), and "Mood" (*Befindlichkeit*) are other examples of existentials. This understanding has common roots with the four major

[37] See: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/existential (accessed on 3 May 2023).
[38] M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2005.

"ultimate concerns" that are described by Irvin Yalom.[39] The concerns that Yalom identifies are death, meaningless, isolation, and freedom. In his understanding, those concerns are "givens of existence," or an "inescapable part" of being human, and every person must come to terms with those concerns through active choices to realize their individual potential.[40] As such, they can be further understood in terms of four existential polarities: (1) Death – and awareness of living a life of one's own; (2) Meaning – and meaninglessness; (3) Being-with – and isolation; (4) Freedom – and limitations and conditionings.[41] Life takes place within the context of those existential polarities.

As mental illness inextricably relates to the whole life of the person, it also relates to this context of existential polarities. Strikingly, one mostly becomes aware of the existential dimension of health during times of illness. This is because illness often increases awareness of the finite nature of one's being-in-the-world.[42] For instance, illness may bring limitations to the activities in life that provide engagement and direction. Illness may also increase awareness of one's mortality.[43] It may challenge the fact that the choices that were made so far do not constitute an essence of who one is. Or, it may make one reconsider projects and roles, and demand that one makes new choices and priorities. Importantly, this can be a healthy process: in illness, a healthy, heightened, and existential awareness can co-exist.[44]

Recovery in the context of mental illness is also precisely concerned with the way in which illness and health can be interrelated. Although recovery is often associated with "treating the consequences of the illness rather than just the illness per se"[45], thereby focusing primarily on health, it is in fact very difficult to draw a firm line between those aspects. Among other things, this finds expression in the fact that a psychiatric condition may also be experienced as life crises and existential or nervous breakdowns, with all kinds of accompanying disturbed

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[39] I.D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy.* New York: Basic Books, 1980.

[40] Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life," 3.

[41] It has been argued that a fifth concern can be added to this: embodiment and emotional being. We can be immersed in our bodily felt experience and witness and reflect on these experiences through our capacity for awareness. Our embodied and emotional being has both a proactive and receptive side. Strength and agency on the one side, and vulnerability and receptivity on the other, are polarities connected to embodiment as an existential concern. See: Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life," 4.

[42] I.D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy.* New York: Basic Books, 1980.

[43] D.W. Kissane, "The relief of existential suffering," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 171 (2012), 1501-1505.

[44] Binder, "Suffering a Healthy Life," 2.

[45] Anthony, "Recovery from mental illness," 523.

feelings and thoughts.[46] The holistic focus on a person's life context in recovery thinking makes clear precisely that mental illness touches the entire structure of one's life-world. There is nothing that is left untouched. Importantly, this implies that it is difficult to distinguish one's experience of mental illness from one's broader life context. To understand the existential, spiritual, and philosophical implications of mental illness in the context of recovery, it is thus crucial to focus on its disruptive character. Indeed, developing an understanding of the crisis *as crisis* makes it possible to develop a conception of recovery in terms of a process by which a person reconstructs their world.

3.2 Grief in Recovery: The Indispensability of Phenomenology

In understanding how exactly one's experience of mental illness relates to one's broader life context, phenomenological understanding is indispensable. Central to phenomenological understanding is the view that human experience incorporates something that is usually overlooked, namely, the sense of 'belonging to' or 'finding oneself in' a world. World, in this understanding, is viewed as a realm that we are always already situated or immersed in when we have an emotional experience of something, or when we perceive or think about something. Because of this, phenomenology does not consider subjectivity as an object to be described but as a medium allowing the world to manifest itself.[47] Phenomenology can therefore be understood as the study of the structure of experience that shapes how people find themselves in the world.

Phenomenological psychopathology draws on the advances of phenomenological research in general: it specifies how the general structure has been *altered* or *disturbed*.[48] As such, the discipline of phenomenological psychopathology is aimed at grasping the existential structures (and alterations thereof) that give coherence and meaning to our experience of world.[49]

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[46] Kusters, "Disruption, Recovery, Religion, and the Value of Crisis," 29.

[47] T. Fuchs, "Phenomenology and psychopathology," in: D. Schmicking & S. Gallagher (eds.). *Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*. Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2010, 546-573 (548).

[48] A.V. Fernandez and A. Køster, "On the Subject Matter of Phenomenological Psychopathology," in G. Stanghellini, M. Broome, A. V. Fernandez, P. Fusar-Poli, A. Raballo, and R. Rosfort (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 191-204.

[49] R. Ritunnano, D. Papola, M.R. Broome & B. Nelson, "Phenomenology as a resource for translational research in mental health: methodological trends, challenges and new directions," *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 32, e5 (2023), 1-7.

Phenomenological psychopathology has come to be understood as a description of the subjective experiences of patients suffering mental conditions or disorders. Furthermore, it has come to be understood as a search for their conditions of possibilities, that is, the structures of subjectivity that underpin the experience of reality, which, when modified, determine psychopathological life-worlds.[50] Because of this, it has been suggested that the discipline is not just illness-oriented, but also person-oriented and (life-)world oriented.[51] Phenomenology thus offers a way to develop an enriched psychiatry that takes subjectivity seriously when selecting the object of enquiry, targets of treatment and preferred outcomes.[52]

From a phenomenological point of view, mental illness manifests itself in an alteration of a person's overall being-in-the-world.[53] People report inhabiting a world that is different from one that was previously taken for granted. For instance, the world may be experienced as different, unreal, inescapable, hyperreal, unfamiliar, detached, meaningless, or overly meaningful. To understand how this is the case, phenomenology relates psychopathology to the basic structures of consciousness such as self-awareness, embodiment, spatiality, temporality, intentionality, and intersubjectivity. Phenomenological psychopathology understands mental conditions or disorders as modifications of those main dimensions of the life-world.

However, besides a loss of health, there is empirical evidence that other losses are also central to the experience of mental illness.[54] In understanding the disruptive character of mental illness, it is thus not enough to focus only on a description of symptoms that are present or diminishing but it is also required to pay attention to the extent to which other losses that are associated with the condition are present. In this context, one may think of the loss of one's relationships, one's identity, or one's future plans. Importantly, those pervasive and deeply-felt experiences of loss may also constitute experiences of grief. Despite the scarcity of studies in the context of mental illness about grief over

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[50] G. Messas, M. Tamelini, M. Mancini & G. Stanghellini, "New Perspectives in Phenomenological Psychopathology: Its Use in Psychiatric Treatment," *Frontiers in psychiatry* 9 (2018), 466.

[51] R. Ritunnano et al., "Phenomenology as a resource for translational research in mental health," 1-2.

[52] G. Stanghellini & M.R. Broome, "Psychopathology as the basic science of psychiatry," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 205 (2014), 169-170.

[53] Fuchs, "Phenomenology and psychopathology," 548.

[54] See, for instance: M. Mauritz & B. van Meijel, "Loss and grief in patients with schizophrenia: on living in another world," *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 23:3 (2009), 251-260; A.E.Z. Baker & N.G. Procter, "You just lose the people you know: relationship loss and mental illness," *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 29 (2015), 96-101.

losses that are associated with the condition, a focus on grief may provide the key to a more complete understanding of the disruptive character of mental illness. More specifically, a focus on grief over losses associated with the condition allows for a better understanding of suffering in the context of mental illness.

Phenomenology offers a valuable tool to further explore this topic as it enables to explore experiences of grief not in an isolated way but in relation to a person's life-world. In giving a central place to grief over losses that are associated with the condition it becomes possible to understand how suffering and coping with challenges relates to meaningfulness (or meaninglessness). This potentially allows for a more in-depth understanding of meaning and sense-making in recovery: it allows for incorporating themes of loss and grief as crucial aspects of the recovery process. This is crucial not only in understanding how the development of new identities and new meanings in recovery involves dealing with grief but also in getting a more complete understanding of how the various dimensions of recovery hang together.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the topic of recovery in the context of mental illness has been situated in a different way of thinking about illness and health. This understanding is characterized by the view that challenges and suffering are inherent to life and that people have an ability to deal with those life challenges. It has been elaborated how this idea influenced recovery thinking in the context of mental illness. Personal recovery is concerned with 'coming to terms with' or 'learning to live with' the impact that a psychiatric condition has on many different areas in life. Although meaning in life has a central role in this understanding of recovery, it has been argued that the specific way in which meaning and sense-making is understood in recovery thinking is rather limited. This is because the specific conception of meaning and sense-making in recovery thinking diverts the attention away from the role and impact of (permanent) vulnerability and loss in relation to the meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) of one's life during mental health crisis and its aftermath. However, because it is difficult to draw a firm line between one's experience of mental illness and one's broader life context it has been suggested to approach recovery from an existential perspective, thereby viewing recovery as an existential phenomenon. This makes it possible to shift the focus to the disruptive character of mental illness and to develop an

understanding of the crisis *as crisis*. In so doing, it becomes possible to incorporate themes of loss and grief as crucial aspects in the recovery process. It has been argued that such an existential perspective would benefit from a phenomenological approach, as it allows to explore experiences of grief not in an isolated way but in relation to one's life-world. A focus on grief may thus provide the key to an understanding of the relationship between suffering and meaning in life, thereby viewing recovery in terms of reconstructing one's world.

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Information about the Authors

David Matheson

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Carleton University.

Matthew Pianalto

Professor of Philosophy, Department of History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies, Eastern Kentucky University.

Bernice Brijan

Ph.D. student and lecturer, Tilburg University/University of York.